

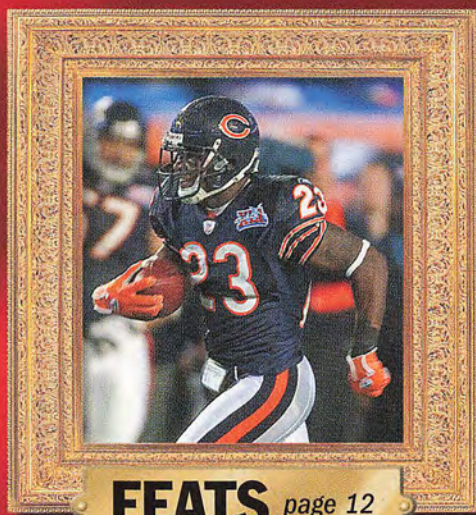
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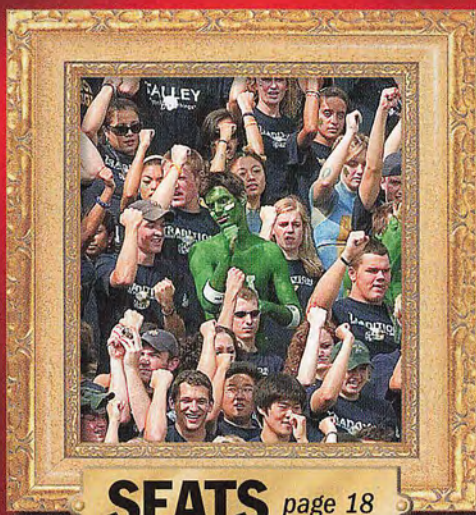
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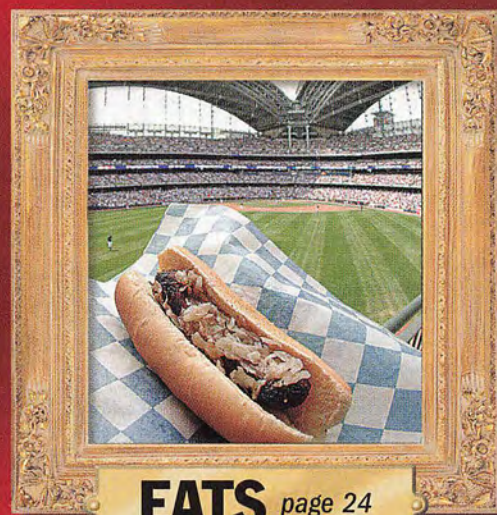
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SEATS page 18



EATS page 24

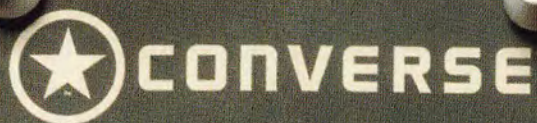
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Week of August 6, 2007

Best Sports City 2007

1. Detroit
2. New York
3. Dallas-Fort Worth
4. Chicago

Left to right:
Chicago's
Devin Hester,
Notre Dame fans,
bratwurst at
Miller Park



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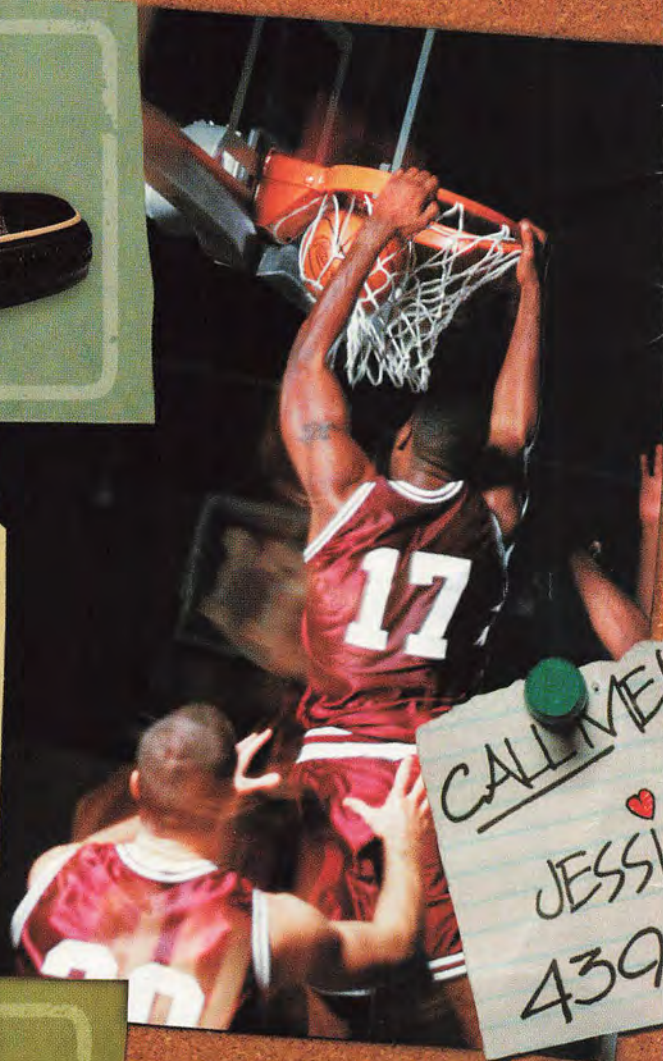
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RIP STOP LOW



RIP STOP HIGH



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THIS SportingNews WEEK 32

There are no existing photos of Jeff Francoeur with a bat on his shoulder.

COVER STORY > COVER STORY 10 The Best

Take our tour of the top **feats**, **seats** and **eats**, which ends, fittingly, in the year's Best Sports City.

12 FEATS: Thanks for the memories From L.T. to L.J. and beyond, the records and milestones that didn't have a dang thing to do with Barry Bonds.

18 SEATS: Views to kill for You haven't lived until you've taken a ride atop the Green Monster.

24 EATS: Yummy, yummy in our tummy Check out this all-ballpark menu: Rocky Mountain oysters, sausage and chowder, fish tacos, Old Style beer, Schmitters and, of course, the best meats you could ever want to eat.

28 BEST SPORTS CITY: Motown is the town There was no bubbly or championship parade in Detroit, but there was plenty of winning and good cheer.

> BASEBALL

32 A low-tech success

As other players increasingly lean on video and detailed swing analysis, Braves outfielder Jeff Francoeur thrives with his see-it, hit-it approach. *By Ryan Fagan*

KNOW IT ALL

- 4 **To Know List** For Curt Schilling, it's time to put up *and* shut up.
- 6 **On Deck** NASCAR does Canada, and America—finally—does some football. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5**.
- 7 **Yellow fever** Doh! Some classic sports moments from *The Simpsons*.
- 8 **Your Turn** A-Rod sure seems like a lock for the home run record.
- 9 **SN Radio** Words of wisdom on everything from NFL turmoil to Charles Barkley's, uh, career plan.

INSIDER

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- + **EXPOSURE**

COVER: FROM LEFT: BOB LEVERONE / SN;
MICHAEL McNAMARA / SN ARCHIVES; DAVID DUROCHIK FOR SN

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This week on SportingNews .COM



/COLLEGE FOOTBALL/
Top 25 ... and counting

We're entering the final stretch of our top 25 countdown. Can Bruce Davis and a veteran Bruins defense keep UCLA in the hunt for spot in a BCS bowl? We address that question and hot-button issues for every team as we work our way to No. 1 at sportingnews.com/cfootball.

Counterpoints

Each Wednesday, Matt Hayes and Tom Dienhart clash in a head-to-head debate. This week: Which first-year coach will do best? Weigh in with your take at sportingnews.com/cfootball.

We know everything about Davis' Bruins—and we're willing to share.

/FANTASY GAMES/ The fantasy season is here

SportingNews.com not only has four great pro football games to choose from, it will also give you your fantasy fix on Saturday afternoons. With Fantasy College Football Challenge, build a franchise around a roster of eight teams at fantasygames.sportingnews.com.

/NFL/ Preseason news and views

Our experts are reporting from training sites across the country; this week, the itinerary calls for stops with the Cowboys and Colts. Get their preseason story lines at sportingnews.com/nfl.

/MEMBERS/ Five-star profile

★★★★★

Member name: Im Hittin It
Member since: March 2001
Hometown: West Covina, Calif.

Favorite teams: St. Louis Cardinals, Steelers, Sonics, Oklahoma State, Penn State, Carl Edwards

Fantasy status: Top 10s in hoops, baseball and football.

On Curt Schilling's latest steroids statements: "Curt has gone beyond his personality and shared his conviction at his own expense."

On steroids in the game: "Make steroids legal and let the juicers play with an asterisk during their careers, not after. Wanna sell out and/or kill yourself breaking a record? Go ahead ... just have the guts to do it to our faces."

On golf: "Tiger is da man ... you gotta play this sport to appreciate it."

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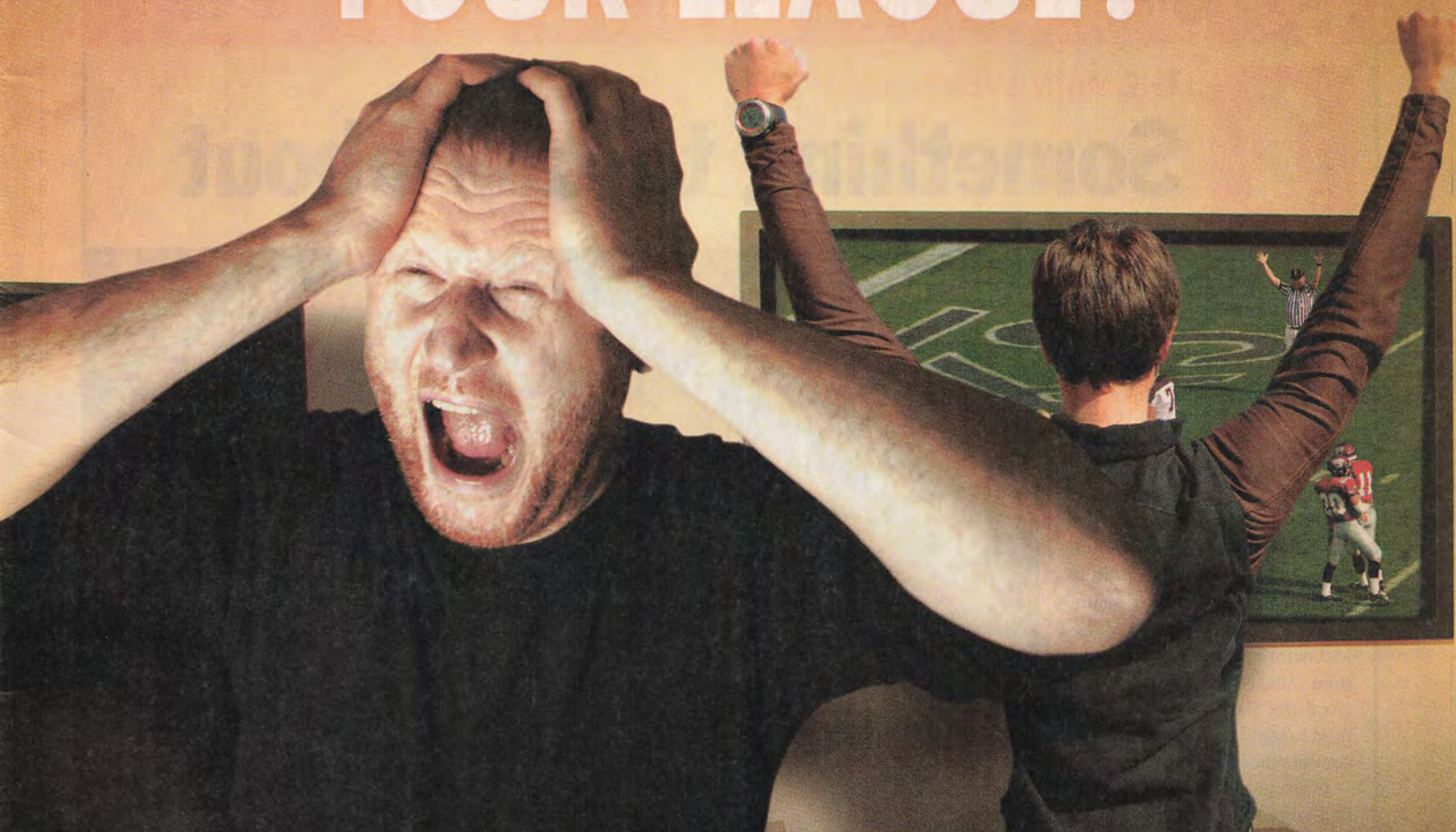
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TO KNOW LIST

6 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

1

THE MAIN EVENT

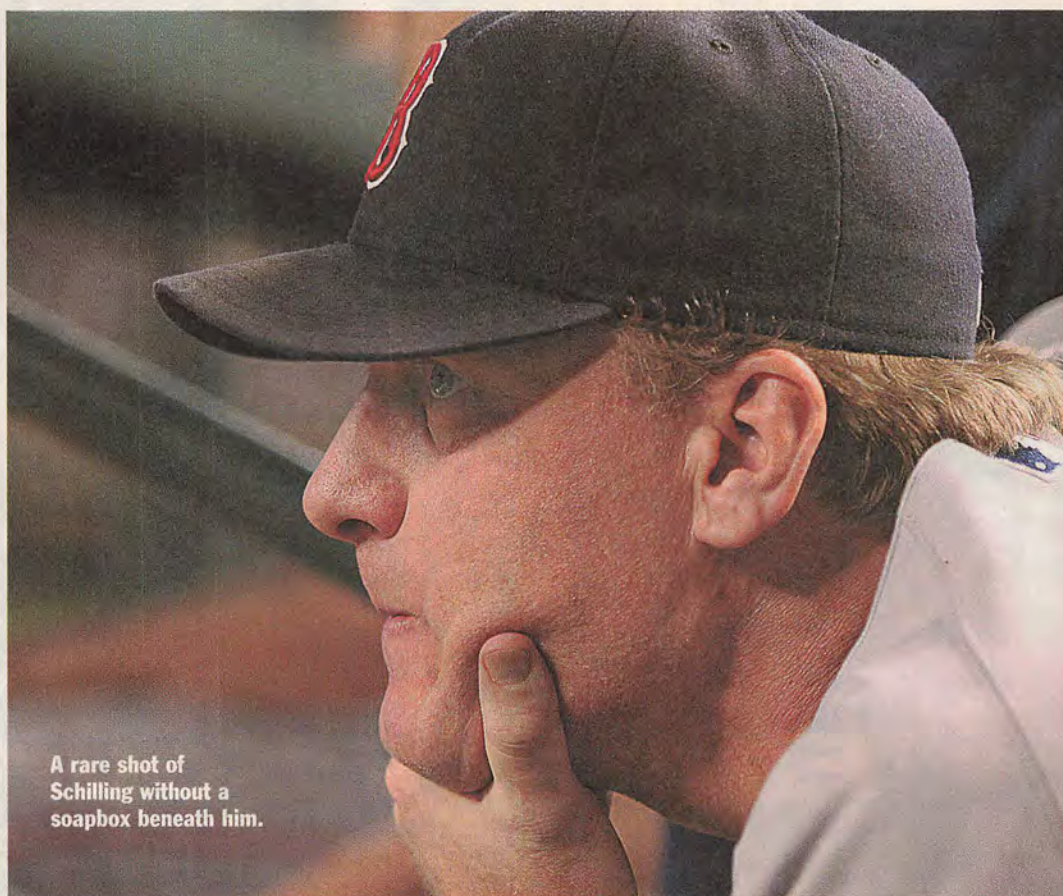
Something to talk about

Before the start of the 2001 World Series, then-Diamondbacks pitcher Curt Schilling, in an attempt to demystify the Yankees, said *aura* and *mystique* were names of dancers in a nightclub. His comment was effective and pretty dang funny.

These days, though, no one seems to care much for hearing the naked truth from the man. In an HBO interview with Bob Costas last week, Schilling stepped on his soapbox again and wagged his tongue at Mark McGwire and Barry Bonds for their suspected steroids use. (And no, Barry, Costas didn't need to stand on a box himself to conduct the interview.)

If just about any other player had gone there, he would have been applauded. But there were only sighs and eye rolls pointed toward baseball's self-appointed moral authority. Schilling, you see, has gained the reputation for being something of a grandstander and blowhard.

But even if you want to tune out Schilling the orator, Schilling the pitcher still is worth your attention. He is expected to return Sunday or Monday after a D.L. stint for shoulder tendinitis. And the Red Sox can use him, their best record in baseball notwithstanding. The offense has been good but not great, and the Sox likely will need dominant pitching from Josh Beckett, Daisuke Matsuzaka and Schilling in order to secure home-field advantage and navigate



A rare shot of Schilling without a soapbox beneath him.

their way through the postseason.

This also is a chance for Schilling to, again, write his legacy. He has gone from being

Even if you want to tune out Schilling the orator, Schilling the pitcher still is worth your attention.

known as an immature goofball with the Orioles to being talented but injury prone with the Phillies to a champion and philanthropist with the D-backs—he was SPORTING NEWS'

sportsman of the year in 2001. Then, of course, he became a legend, putting the red sock in the Red Sox.

Now, though, he's known more for verbal arrows than 95-mph darts. But if he comes back and helps the Red Sox to another world championship—which would be Schilling's third ring in seven years—it would be hard to question his, well, mystique.

With Schilling, forget put up or shut up. It's time to put up *and* shut up. —Kyle Veltrop

2 (NOT) IN THE SPOTLIGHT: BARRY BONDS' TEAMMATES

Bitter batters

Well, whaddya know? Turns out Barry Bonds isn't a one-ring circus after all. As Bonds began his final assault on baseball's home run record last week, two prominent members of the Giants organization let that be known.

Shortstop Omar Vizquel, likely a future Hall of Famer, has hinted a few times this season at his annoyance with the media's focus on Bonds. But after moving past Ozzie Smith into second place on baseball's career games played list at shortstop, Vizquel complained outright in an interview with *USA Today*. "I don't think three people here even know I passed Ozzie," Vizquel said. "And if they do know, they couldn't care less. There's only one record anyone around here cares about."

Giants owner Peter Magowan kicked it up a notch over the weekend when he told reporters—without actually saying the words—that a team built around Bonds' home run swing is not part of the organization's future plans. Magowan is frustrated with the Giants' losing, of course. So are Bonds' teammates. Maybe Bonds, who will become a free agent at season's end, is, too.

Goodbye, 755. And goodbye, Barry by the Bay. —Steve Greenberg



Bonds might be smiling, but teammates such as Vizquel certainly are not.

—Ryan Fagan

3 RADIO

Improving the reception

Want an order of NFL with a side of NBA? You could be in luck. As the proposed \$3 billion Sirius-XM satellite radio merger worms its way toward approval by the FCC, it has been revealed that consumers will have more flexibility in their options than ever. Subscribers will pay a lower base price—\$6.99 for 50 channels, down from \$12.95—and be able to select other programming at a cost of 25 cents per additional channel. (Premium channels will cost more.) There also will be eight programming packages available, ranging up to \$16.99. The companies hope to have the merger completed by the end of the year.

4 TELEVISION

Cold turkey

An overlooked loser in the Michael Vick saga: the NFL Network. Its first regular-season broadcast of the season is slated for Thanksgiving night. The official matchup is Colts vs. Falcons, but the real billing read Peyton Manning, one of the greatest pocket passers in NFL history, vs. Michael Vick, the greatest running quarterback the league has ever seen. Alas, Vick's trial for federal dogfighting charges starts November 26, which makes it extremely unlikely he'll be under center four days earlier. That means the "NFL N" must hope a turkey-stuffed nation is football-hungry enough to tune in to watch Joey Harrington get the stuffing knocked out of him. At least Thanksgiving is a holiday about tradition—because that is something we are used to seeing. —K.V.



This may be your last on-field look at Vick for a while.

6 LIFESTYLES

But can you burp let's go team?

If you've ever been taken out to the ballgame, you know the line: "Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack." Well, at a growing number of parks, that part of baseball's seventh-inning anthem needs tweaking. To something like this: "Hand me some peanuts and popcorn ... and, while you're at it, throw in some nachos and hot dogs—and don't forget the sodas."

For those with large appetites, the best deal going these days has nothing to do with clam chowder or fish tacos (see page 24). It's a ticket in selected "cheap seats" that includes all-you-can-eat concessions. The promotion has gone over so big in its first full year at Dodger Stadium that other clubs—the Braves, Royals, Orioles and Rangers among them—have copied the idea. Before long, another change to the tune may be needed: "If they don't bring the antacid, it's a shame." —Stan McNeal



Pick up the pace, boys—you only have four innings left!

5 IT BEARS REPEATING

'Our presidents have no interest whatsoever in a plus-one model—none. It's a little annoying that my colleagues continue to float this idea as though it has merit.'

—Pac-10 commissioner Tom Hansen to *SPORTING NEWS Insider* Matt Hayes on his opposition to a playoff in college football. For the rest of Hansen's take—as well as daily reports from all of the major conferences' college football media days—go to sportingnews.com.

ON DECK

The week ahead in sports

Ladies and gentlemen, meet John Daly's game face.



THIS I GOTTA SEE All times Eastern

PICK of the WEEK

SAT 4 NASCAR makes history when the **Busch Series races in Canada** (3:30 p.m., ESPN2). Look for an invading Nextel Cup driver, Jeff Burton perhaps, to take the checkers at Montreal's famed Le Zeesis-nothockeyeh Road Course.

Oh, Canada, here we come!



SUN 5 We start to put the talk about suspensions and brutalizing dogs behind us when the Steelers and Saints play in the **Hall of Fame Game** (8 p.m., NFL Network). What better salve for our wounded souls than the dulcet sounds of Bryant Gumbel and Cris Collinsworth?

WED 8 I'm man enough to admit it: Every time I hear of **Hard Knocks** (10 p.m., HBO), that song from *Annie* (y'know, the little orphan) goes through my head. Maybe when the Chiefs convene camp, HBO's cameras will catch a rook singing Annie's classic instead of his college song.

THU 9 The **PGA Championship** (2 p.m., TNT) opens at Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa, Okla. Please, no steroids talk. Let's do this by the book—count every shot, hit the ball where it lies, etc. John Daly, you hit the one in the middle. —Matt Crossman



K.C.'s Tamba Hali should be glad his rookie year is behind him.

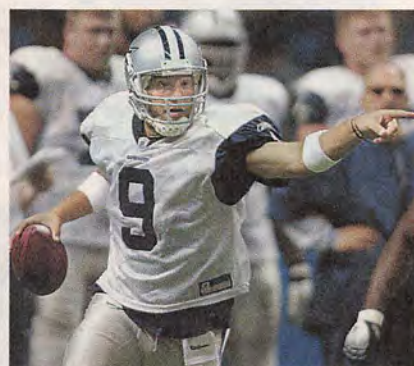
COMING AT YOU

In the August 13 issue

The 'Boy is back in town. Many quarterbacks have tried, but few have become legends in Dallas. For every Roger Staubach or Troy Aikman, there are three Drew Bledsoes or Chad Hutchinsons or Quincy Carters. Where does Tony Romo, the latest star in the making, fit in?

■ Twins reliever Pat Neshek gets funky—with impressive results.

Who's Romo pointing at—his pop star girlfriend or his receiver?



BOB HILLE'S STARTING

5

1 A.L. East. Red Sox or Yankees, how will it shake down? To quote a Rays fan: I'm at a loss.

2 NFL camps. Some practices are "live." Case in point: After being tackled, Bengals players take Brealyzer tests.

3 Gambling. It's scary one man could affect the outcome of NBA games ... one man not named Stern, at least. Am I right, Suns fans?

4 The Falcons. Events have set them back 20 years. Speaking of which, who thought the Marion Campbell era would ever be called "the good old days"?

5 The Tour de France. It's hard watching a nation's beloved and revered sport destroyed by juicers, cheaters and law-breakers, huh?

FROM TOP: PETER MORRISON / AP; ALBERT DICKSON / SN; HAROLD HINSON FOR SN; ERIC GAY / AP



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PINKS ALL OUT 8E/9P

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Yellow fever

More than 40 athletes and sports celebrities have made guest appearances on *The Simpsons*, and sports have played major (and minor) roles in dozens of episodes. With *The Simpsons Movie* in theaters, say *Ay, Caramba!* to this highlight reel from mythical Springfield.

Baseball

Homer at the Bat could go down as the greatest melding of sports and entertainment ever, and that would be true if the entire episode consisted of nothing but Roger Clemens clucking like a chicken. If only Barry Bonds had gotten Ken Griffey's role as a player with an immensely swollen head . . . The superstar appearances are bizarre and funny, but they're not the highlight of *HatB*. That comes when Marge is sitting in the stands videotaping the game and asks the kids to tell her when Homer stops scratching himself. Seconds pass. "Kids?" "We'll tell you, Mom."



If this doesn't look like a team of winners, what does?

X Games

Can't type without laughing when trying to describe *Bart the Daredevil*, in which Homer tries to jump a skateboard over a gorge, doesn't make it, bangs his head all the way down, gets put on a gurney and raised by a helicopter, bangs his head all the way up, then the ambulance crashes and he rolls out and falls down the gorge again, banging his head all the way down. Years later, Tony Hawk made a guest appearance.

Boxing

Larry Holmes, Smokin' Joe Frazier, Oscar De La Hoya and Gerry Cooney have been on the show. But *The Homer They Fall*, in which Michael Buffer plays himself and Don King and Mike Tyson are parodied, is too good to pass up. Homer excels at boxing by letting opponents beat him until they tire out, then simply pushes them over. King reportedly turned down a chance to be in the episode.

Football

The writers must have a thing for quarterbacks. Johnny Unitas, Dan Marino, Troy Aikman, Tom Brady and Terry Bradshaw have appeared on the show. So have Rosey Grier, John Madden, Pat Summerall and Warren Sapp. But none of their episodes even approaches *Bart Star*, in which Homer coaches a peewee football team. The show peaks when Homer delights in cutting little kids. Joe Namath attempts to give Bart advice but is called away by a woman (not Suzy Kolber).

'And don't hit on the sideline reporter ... just trust me.'

Golf

In *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield*, the show's biting satire is in full effect. Marge recasts the same outfit (a \$90 Chanel suit, marked down from \$2,800) time and again to go to the snooty Springfield Country Club. Tom Kite plays golf with Homer.

Dog racing

The sports don't come until the end in *Two Dozen and One Greyhounds*, but Mr. Burns singing about his wardrobe being made from animals—"Like my loafers? Former gophers, it was that, or skin my chauffeurs"—is inspired. That is easily the funniest song in the history of the show, maybe the funniest scene.

—Matt Crossman



YOUR TURN

You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to yourturn@sportingnews.com.



⚡ Craig Biggio plays the game the right way. The only question as far as the Hall of Fame is concerned is whether he will be able to get all the pine tar and dirt out of his clothes in time to be inducted. —*chgibbs via SportingNews.com*

■ NBA referee Tim Donaghy's involvement in an organized crime point-shaving scheme (SN, July 30) doesn't really surprise me. I am amazed it doesn't happen more often, especially considering the amount of gambling that goes on in sports. —*Kenneth L. Zimmerman, Huntington Beach, Calif.*

■ The saddest part of this whole Donaghy story is that nobody is shocked in the least. It is also sad that a ref does not have to make one obviously terrible call to affect the game. There is so much flexibility in making the calls—who can say what a bad call is? —*snowhill via SportingNews.com*

■ Jose Reyes (SN, July 30) is a joy to watch play every day. He hustles, has a lot of talent and

exudes the pure joy we wish every baseball player would show. The best part about Reyes is that he can still get better. —*sealshockey via SportingNews.com*

■ Michael Vick's selfishness in being involved with that dogfighting ring—something he had to know would blow up in his face sooner or later—has cast his team, his

city and the NFL in a horrifically bad light (SN, July 30). But did he care? Obviously not. Well, Vick's sown the harvest. Now he's reaping the whirlwind. —*Flashjeff via SportingNews.com*

■ Poetic justice would be the Joey Harrington-led Falcons making it to the playoffs while Vick goes to prison. —*The Badeye via SportingNews.com*

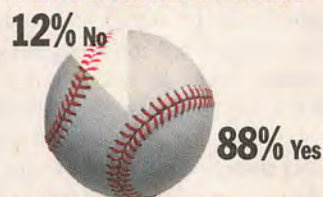


Fans are ticked at Vick, and PETA's not too thrilled, either.



POLLING PLACE
Will **A-Rod** break the career home run record someday?

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RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

'All these issues facing the major sports are taking away from the important factors in sports. There are more great baseball milestones to be reached, and the pennant races are shaping up to be thrilling—that's what should matter right now!' —*Dan in Philly on the Tony Bruno Show*

GMC BLOG LIKE THE PROS

Posted by woodmanaz:

It's the time of year when NASCAR runs amok with news of possible driver changes. Here are my Silly Season predictions (I did say they were silly):

1. Joe Nemecek is blackballed from NASCAR after his mother beats up the owner of Ginn Racing for letting her son go.

2. Kyle Busch joins RCR Racing and is sponsored by Pampers.

3. Dale Jr. is sponsored in '08 by Pepsi. A terrible accident happens



during the offseason when a big Pepsi ball rolls over him during a commercial shoot.

4. Tony Stewart is forced to stop the fence-climbing celebrations when he slips and tears his uniform off completely, leaving him looking like Ricky Bobby on fire.

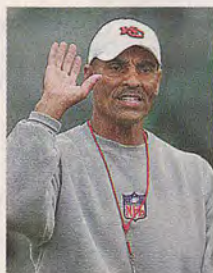
5. Denny Hamlin installs brake lights and reverse lights for the times when he is leading teammate Tony Stewart on the track.

To see more of woodmanaz's blog, and many others, visit **SPORTINGBLOGS** at sportingnews.com.

S SPORTING NEWS RADIO

Teeing off

At the American Century Celebrity Golf Tournament in Lake Tahoe, talk on the course ranged from the NFL's troubled offseason to Charles Barkley's, uh, career plan



Herm Edwards

On the offseason legal troubles in the NFL:

"There's 1,952 players in our league. Well, let's say there's 15 guys who make mistakes. That's not a big percentage. But all of a sudden, the league is out of control. Well, the league's not out of control. There's a few players who have made some errors that have caused a spotlight to be put on the league. 1,952 guys, 15 of them get in trouble—that happens. That happens in big business. That's life. Someone's going to get in a jam. These guys ain't choirboys. They're going to make some mistakes."

On NFL commissioner Roger Goodell's approach to discipline:

"The thing that affects players the most is when you have to tell a healthy player he can't play. They understand that—they are performance-driven. They like to go play on the grass. If you can take that away from them, all of a sudden the message is a lot louder and clearer. I think the commissioner is going to take that stand now. It's not pretty at times. You say, 'Well, maybe it's too hard,' or 'It's soft.' Anything you do, there's going to be a casualty or two early, but then once that is set, they know how to adjust. Our players will understand that if these are the circumstances, then the consequences are going to be these."

Charles Barkley

On his failure to win a championship:

"I told Peyton Manning, 'Hey man, thank God you finally won one so you can get off the s— list.' Every year when something happens during the playoffs they show the s— list: guys who never won anything. I'll be sitting at home minding my own business every year, then in every sport they'll show these great players who never won."

On the NBA's new eight-year TV deal:

"I hope they don't fire me until I sign my new deal. I've got one year left on my deal. I said, 'Please, wait until I get my name on one of those eight-year deals before you fire me.' I told them, 'I ain't never going to resign, because if you resign, you don't get paid. Y'all can fire me any time you want to.'"



For the sake of golfers everywhere, let's hope Chuck keeps his day job.

Tim Brown

On his foray into NASCAR ownership:

"When you look at NASCAR, it's a great sport. For years, I looked at it as a redneck sport. I've always loved NASCAR, but I was really afraid to approach it because I thought it was not for me. But over the last couple years, I've had the opportunity to go to over 20 races, and the people there have just been great. Obviously, the one thing NASCAR's lacking is diversity. They have the fans and they have the marketing—they have everything going for



them—but they don't have the diversity. We hope we can bring a little diversity to NASCAR."

On whether NASCAR drivers are athletes:

"They're athletes—they're just a different

kind of athlete. Obviously, you can't ask someone to go run a 40 or a catch a ball or shoot a jump shot, but I wouldn't want to sit in that doggone car for four hours going 180 miles an hour, either."

Bob Berger and Bob Stelton's show airs weekends from 1-7 p.m. ET on Sporting News Radio.

WE EXAMINED EVERYTHING.

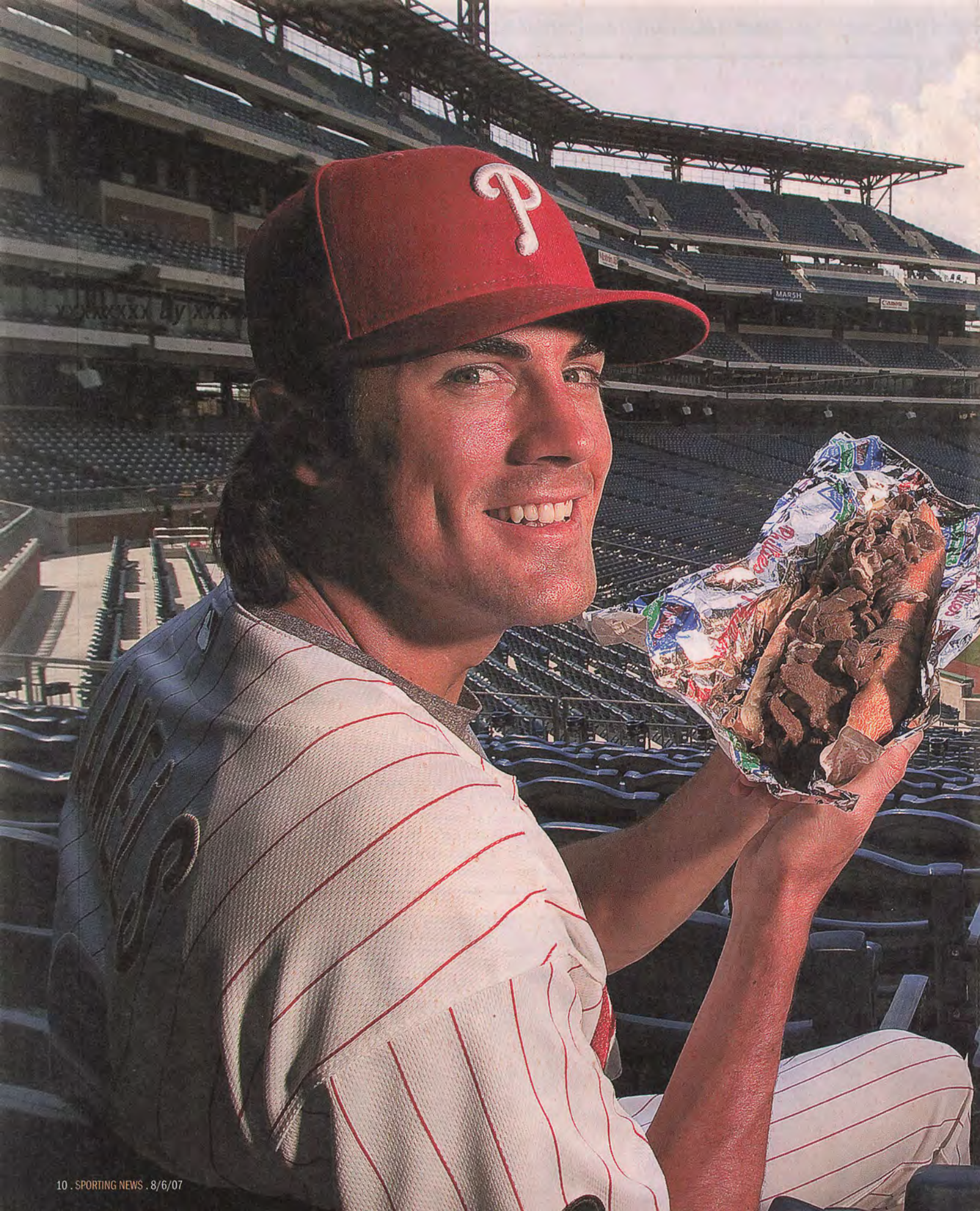


AND OVERLOOKED NOTHING.

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could an All-Star pitcher ask for?

As fans, what more could we ask
for than mind-blowing plays on
the field, haunch-hugging seats
beneath us and mouth-watering
food over here, over there ...
yo, fish taco man!

Feats, seats and eats—
along with the No. 1 sports town
of the past year—are celebrated
here. Our motto: You can't beat

THE BEST.

Thanks for the mile

Uh, Barry? Please step aside so we can celebrate the ones that don't have a dang thing to do with you. *By Steve Greenberg*

He stood tall, struck that ball and, through it all, never let us see him sweat. When lesser heroes might have been bowed, the aged lefty kept showing up and kept on swinging.

I am talking, of course, about Morten Andersen.

Ol' Morty didn't have much of a 2006 season for the Falcons. At 46 years old, he merely made 87 percent of his field goals and 100 percent of his PATs and—oh, yeah—took hold of the NFL career records for points and field goals. In case you missed it: Those milestone numbers are 2,435 and 539.



It sure feels good to focus on upbeat, fun-loving record-breakers like Favre and that huggable man to the immediate left.

Stat Packer. You want a number that deserves to be in the same conversation as 756? Try 5,021. That's how many completions Brett Favre has thrown, and he's the only NFL quarterback who has reached 5,000. Favre's 4,968th last December put him above Dan Marino on the all-time list. He also threw his 400th touchdown pass last season, joining only Marino in the 400 club.

Net finders. In the long, occasionally glorious history of the NHL, only 17 players have scored 600 goals. Three of them—Brendan Shanahan, Jaromir Jagr and Joe Sakic—did it last season. The only active players on the all-time list ended the season 12th, 13th and tied for 14th, respectively.

Point men. Just imagine if the Big Clang-o-Matic could shoot free throws. Despite a down-and-downer 2006-07 season with the Heat, Shaquille O'Neal became the 14th NBA player to score 25,000 points. (Only one member of that club, Alex English, made fewer foul shots than Shaq.) Meanwhile, his former teammate Kobe Bryant—basketball's A-Rod—became the youngest player to reach 19,000 points. Kareem won't top that scoring list forever.

stone memories

878 ... 879 ... Happy New Year! On January 1, Texas Tech beat New Mexico, which gave Bob Knight career win No. 880—and relegated Dean Smith, a man no one seems to have a cross word for, to second place on the all-time list. Hate on The General all you wish; when you're playing shuffleboard at Del Boca Vista, he'll still be prowling the sideline.

For some odd reason, baseball milestones still trump everything else. Craig Biggio's 3,000th hit. Sammy Sosa's 600th dinger. Frank Thomas' 500th long ball. Trevor Hoffman's 500th save, the most ever. They were all big deals—even amidst Barry Bonds' world-stopping homer chase—as Tom Glavine's 300th win and Ken Griffey's 600th ding-dong surely will be.

Season records count, too, pal

No one—not Bonds, the Babe nor Gretzky—has had a hands-down better season than LaDainian Tomlinson's 2006. Let's see here ... the *real* L.T. set NFL season records for touchdowns (31), rushing touchdowns (28) and points (186). What



Tomlinson had (yawn) the best season ever for a running back.

more can a man do to stake his claim to the title of The Best?

That other L. Larry Johnson—aka L.J.—set a record all his own last season, and it can be argued his mark was more impressive than any of Tomlinson's. In a one-dimensional Chiefs offense, Johnson carried the ball 416 times. What do you suppose would happen to you if you were attacked by an eight-man front even once?

Mr. 1,000: Michael Vick. Fran Tarkenton couldn't do it. Randall Cunningham couldn't do it. Vince Young ... well, we'll see about that. One NFL quarterback has rushed for 1,000 yards in a season, and no matter what you think of the dog whisperer, you have to be impressed by his ball-carrying in 2006.

The year of the Colt. Super Bowl, schmoooper bowl. Hawaii's Colt Brennan set all-time NCAA marks last season with 58 touchdowns and a passer rating of 186.0. Yeah, he benefited from coach June Jones' system. But many a supercharged system has gone *tilt* because of a QB who simply couldn't handle it.



Standing stone-still or on his head—it's just an expression!—Brodeur's *always* out there.

It was Marty's party, and everyone was invited. Martin Brodeur must have a deal with the devil—he doesn't age a day. In 2006-07, Brodeur, a 34-year-old horse of a goalie, broke Bernie Parent's 33-year-old NHL record with his 48th win of the season. They say the best goalies stand on their heads. Brodeur could do that while polishing off a plate of gabagool.

Team 10,000

On May 15, 1922, the Phillies lost a game. I know, it's shocking. Anyway, the loss dropped their all-time record to 2,728-2,729. And here's the hilarious part: The Phillies have never, ever been .500 since.

On July 15, 2007, the Philly franchise—with none of the members of that '22 team—suffered its 10,000th loss, the most in baseball. Heck, the most in *any* sport.

So, who's next? The Braves—counting the Boston and Milwaukee years—are at 9,690. The Cubs, all in the same cursed town, stand at 9,430.

Remember, kids: For every winner, there's a loser. Being a *good* loser? It just may be the mightiest feat of all.

SN

Contributing: Steve Gietschier

Age is just a state of mind

Old school

- 1. Julio Franco, Mets.** When Franco homered off Randy Johnson, he became the oldest long baller at 48 years, 8 months and 12 days.
- 2. Vinny Testaverde, Patriots.** Tom Brady's backup threw one measly TD pass in 2006, but he's the only player to throw for a score in 20 straight seasons.
- 3. Joe Sakic, Avalanche, and Teppo Numminen, Sabres.** Sakic joined Gordie Howe last season as the only NHL player with a 100-point season past age 36. The Teppster's 1,252nd NHL game put him atop the list among European-trained players.

New school

- 1. Ryan Howard, Phillies.** Homer No. 100 came in his 325th game—way faster than the next-fastest guy, Ralph Kiner (385).
- 2. LeBron James, Cavaliers.** He's the youngest NBA player to reach 8,000 points. Not to mention 7K, 6K, 5K, 4K, 3K, 2K and, you had better believe it, 1K.
- 3. Sidney Crosby and Jordan Staal, Penguins.** The former is the youngest player to win a scoring title and hit 200 career points. The latter is the youngest (18 years, 153 days) to hat-trick it up. —S.G.

Nobody did it better

Streaks, beatdowns, comebacks—these guys rocked it to the core (and, in some cases, made us laugh our rear ends off) *By Steve Greenberg*

Forty-five years ago, a force of nature called Wilt Chamberlain shook the basketball world by scoring at least 50 points in seven consecutive games. Only three other NBA players have done it as many as three straight times: Elgin Baylor, Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant. Says the controversial Lakers star, "It's a tremendous honor for me to be in the same category with those guys."

But Baylor's and Jordan's streaks stopped at three; Bryant made it to four, going for 65, 50, 60 and 50 again. Which is not to say Kobe's binge rates with us as the best streak of the past year.

1 LeBron James goes crazy on the Pistons.

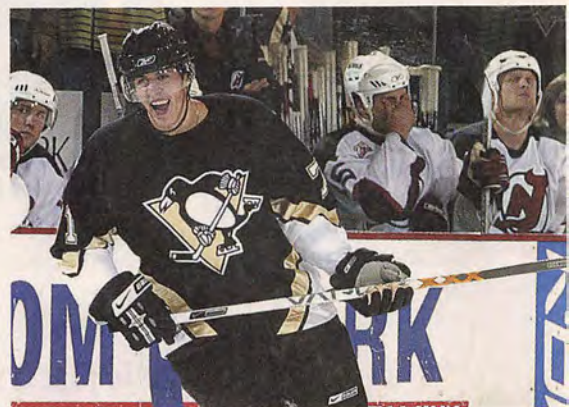
In Game 5 of the Eastern Conference finals at heavily favored Detroit, the Cavaliers were bogging down on offense—again. James, who had been criticized earlier in the series for not taking the big shot down the stretch, knew what he had to do: completely dominate.

And that he did, scoring the Cavs' final 25 points in the fourth quarter and two overtimes of a 109-107 win. Mixed in were jump shots and foul shots, but the shots to the Pistons' hearts came on dunks—uncontested dunks. In short, the Not So Bad Boys were scared to death of LeBron. Neither team will ever be the same.



James

2 Evgeni Malkin hijacks the welcome wagon. Was the 20-year-old Penguins center intimidated at the start of his NHL career? Like Kobayashi was before chomping down on his first frankfurter. Malkin, a former No. 2 overall draft pick, lit the lamp in his very first regular-season game ... and his second ... and his third ... When his streak ended, he was the first player to score a goal in each of his first six games since three guys did it in 1917, the league's inaugural season. Got a feeling that was an easier thing to do 89 years ago.



Malkin was a happy young man after his first NHL goal. And his second ... and his third ...



Watson

3 Brandon Watson makes like DiMaggio.

Eighty-nine years? Watson, a center fielder with the Class AAA Columbus Clippers, went six better. He broke a 95-year International League record by hitting safely in 43 straight games. The best part? Two days after his streak ended, Watson was called up to the Nationals.

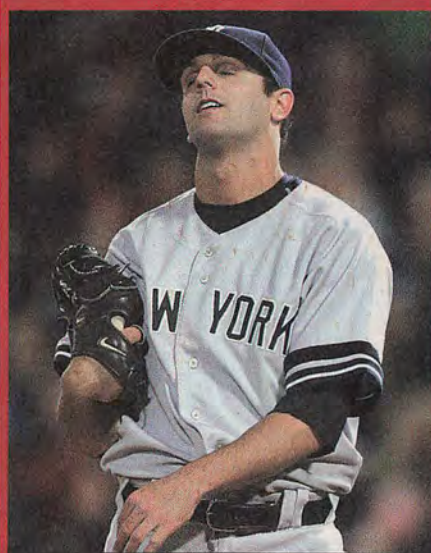
Three hellacious beatdowns

Can you uncover your eyes long enough to ID the biggest winners?



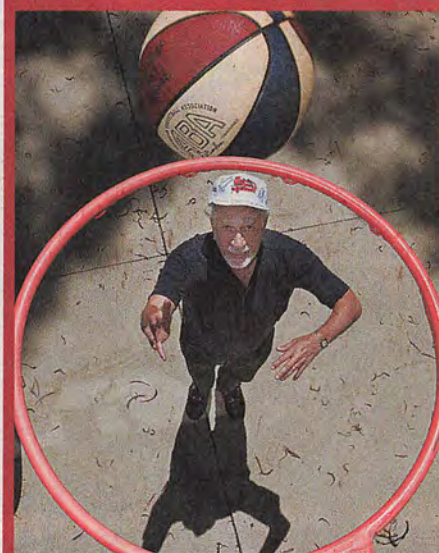
'Troy? Your Heisman Trophy called. It'll just meet you at the hospital.'

Florida vs. Ohio State



Relax, kid. Many a Hall of Famer has given up *five* straight ... OK, maybe not.

Red Sox vs. Chase Wright



Think you could beat the Ozzmeister one-on-one? Not in business, you couldn't.

Silna brothers vs. the NBA

The backstory

Florida, a football school, was still celebrating its first hoops championship as the grid Gators inched closer to a date with No. 1 Ohio State—a football school falling in love with its basketball team—in the BCS title game.

The home team trailed, 3-0, in the third inning back on April 22 but was going for its first three-game Fenway sweep of the dreaded Yankees since 1990. *Sniff. Sniff.* Oh, yeah—the sweet stench of a comeback was in the air.

In 1976, Ozzie and Daniel Silna negotiated a deal for one-seventh of the Nuggets', Nets', Pacers' and Spurs' shares of the NBA's TV revenue—every year in perpetuity—when they agreed to disband the Spirits of St. Louis as part of the ABA-NBA merger.

The horror story

The Buckeyes led the Gators, 7-0, and Heisman winner Troy Smith hadn't even stepped on the field! Sadly for OSU, Smith eventually stepped on the field—and got stepped on about 100 times over in an almost unspeakably hideous 41-14 loss. Three months later, the great Greg Oden got his, too—84-75, Gators. A-stinkin'-gain.

Bang. Gone. No way! Oh, my God!! Manny Ramirez, J.D. Drew, Mike Lowell and Jason Varitek made young Chase Wright the second pitcher in big league history to give up back-to-back-to-back-to-back jacks. The Sox won; the Yanks fell a game below .500. Not that there was any chance they would, y'know, stay there.

Brothers, can you spare \$300 million? That's about how much the Silnas will have hauled in if they survive the duration of the NBA's new eight-year TV contract, which runs through 2016. Total take so far: a couple turkey clubs shy of \$200 mil, money that would have been going to the four ABA teams the NBA *did* want.

The sob story

"I hate the Florida Gators." —*blog.buckeye legends.com*

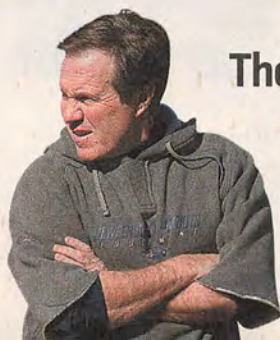
"I tried to stay calm and cool," Wright said. Uh, sure you did, kid.

"It's about the biggest holdup I've ever seen in business." —*Former Kentucky Colonels owner John Y. Brown, who accepted a \$3.3 million buyout in 1976, on CNBC.com*

The wisest words ever spoken

Bill Belichick's training camp philosophy:

'It's hard to be full of yourself while puking.'





Four comebacks we'll never forget

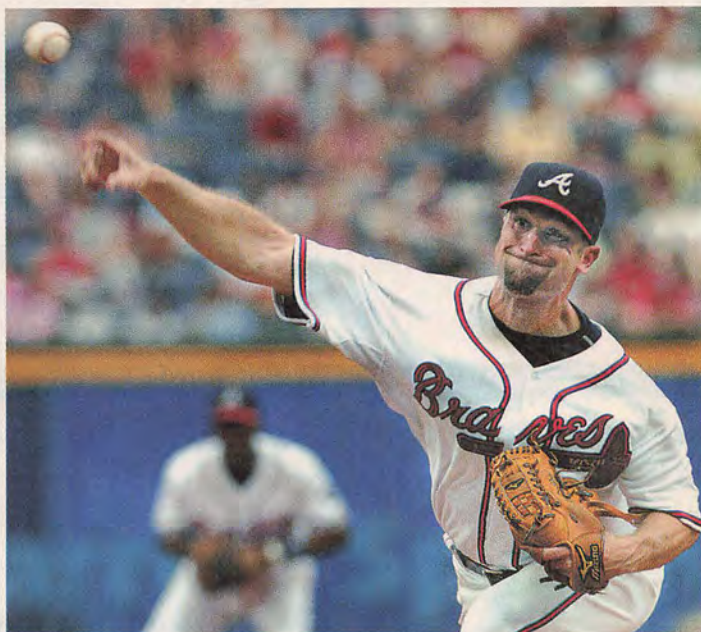
■ **Colts 38, Patriots 34, AFC championship game.** When Indy's nemesis bolted to a 21-3 lead in the second quarter, the game couldn't have seemed more over. It was sad, pathetic, hard to watch; Peyton Manning was destined for a lifetime on the outside looking in at the Super Bowl. Then Manning got hot, linemen Dan Klecko and Jeff Saturday scored two of the fatter touchdowns in franchise history, and the Colts' defense rose up when it was least expected. Bad news, Bears—the Colts were Super Bowl bound.

■ **Georgetown 96, North Carolina 84 (OT), East Region final.** It seemed like a mismatch; the Tar Heels were playing uptempo—as they liked it—and dominating. Trailing, 75-65, with a little over 7 minutes to play and top-seeded UNC's Tyler Hansbrough living at the foul line, the second-seeded Hoyas suddenly, shockingly turned into a shot-blocking, rebounding monster and swallowed the Tar Heels whole—finally tying the game with a last-minute 3-pointer and then making a mockery of the 5-minute overtime session.

■ **Wisconsin 76, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi 63, Midwest Region first round.** Eleven minutes into the game, the Badgers had four points—and Dick Bennett wasn't even in the building. Soon after, it was 25-7 in favor of the 15th-seeded Islanders, who looked like a slightly—OK, severely—watered-down version of the Showtime Lakers. But at the 10:40 mark of the second half, Wisconsin senior Kammron Taylor nailed a 3—his first points of the game—to cut the deficit to 47-44. Taylor scored 14 straight UW points and had 24 by the final buzzer.

■ **Buddy Carlyle.** The kid was 21 when he won his first game in the big leagues, with blue skies ahead. Or so it seemed for a few fleeting moments back in 1999. Eight years later, Carlyle had played for more organizations than he could count and accumulated precisely zero additional wins in the majors. But that changed on June 5, when Carlyle, pitching for the Braves, gave up one run in seven innings to beat the Marlins—who once had sold his contract to a team in Korea. "When you're young and stupid, you don't realize how fortunate you are to be up here," Carlyle said. "This win means 10,000 times more than the other one."

If Big Dan can score a TD and ol' Buddy can win a ballgame ... well, shoot, *anything* can happen. And that may be the very best thing about sports.



Six lucky dogs who lived the dream

■ **Troy Tulowitzki, Rockies.** Against the Braves in April, the shortstop turned the 13th unassisted triple play in major league history.

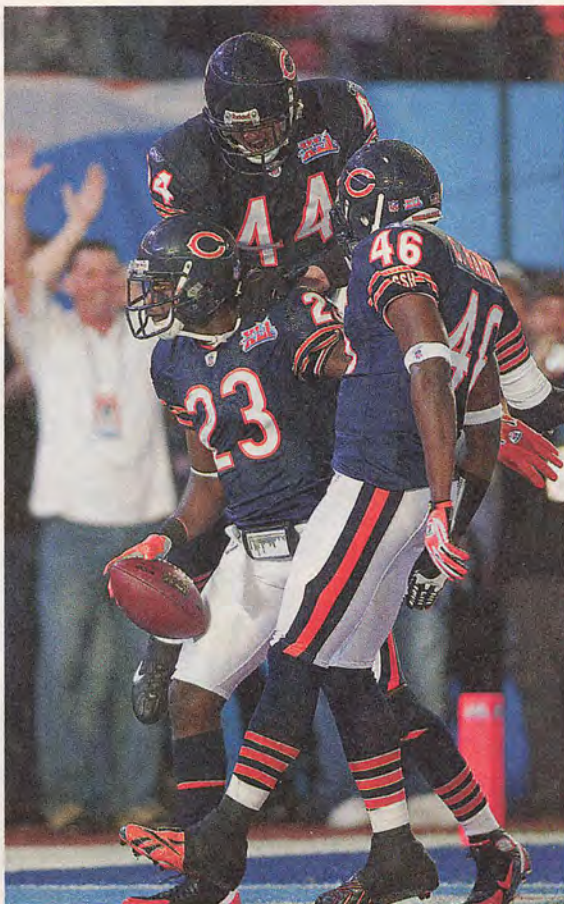
■ **Scott and Rob Niedermayer, Ducks.** They're the first brothers to win the Stanley Cup together since Brent and Duane Sutter with the Islanders in 1983. Said Scott, "It hits pretty hard right in the heart."

■ **Devin Hester, Bears.** Capping a season in which he had a 108-yard field goal return (tied for the longest scoring play in NFL history) and ran back two kickoffs for TDs in another game (tying the record), Hester became the first player to run the opening kick back for a score in the Super Bowl. "It's what I envisioned for the past two weeks," he said.

■ **Anthony Atkinson, Barton College.** He scored 10 points in the final 39 seconds, including a layup at the buzzer, to erase a 7-point deficit and give the Bulldogs their first Division II national title. "Nothing was going to stop me," Atkinson said.

■ **Ron Kulpa, umpire.** He was behind the plate when Curt Schilling's no-hit bid was broken up with two outs in the ninth inning. Five days later, he got the real thing—Justin Verlander's no-no in Detroit.

Unfortunately for the Bears, there was nowhere to go but down after Hester's runback.



After the Fiesta, Petersen could enter any room of coaches and be a star.

The gutsiest finish ever has to get its own category, right?

Chris Petersen has had a rule all offseason: No living in the past allowed. In other words, please stop talking about Boise State's 43-42 win over Oklahoma in the Fiesta Bowl. But that rule is intended for Petersen's players and coaches. What's he going to do to us—kick us off the team for daring to speak of the three calls that rocked our world?

■ A hook-and-ladder play that went for a 50-yard, game-tying touchdown with 7 seconds left.

■ A pass from wideout Vinny Perretta to tie the game in overtime.

■ The best call in the history of football: a Statue of Liberty play for the winning 2-point conversion.

All those stuffy, conservative play-calling coaches out there were undressed by Petersen's hellbent-for-fun decisions, which made a nation of football fans wish they really were part of that team.

LEFT TO RIGHT: NBC UNIVERSAL, INC.; BOB LEVERONE / SN; CHARLES KRUPA / AP



A priest, a rabbi and a Super Bowl QB walk into a bar ...

There is something about the face of a Manning that says, in perfect monotone, "I wouldn't know funny if it walked into an elevator, threw me against the wall and kissed me like I've never been kissed before." But there isn't much the likes of John Salley, John Kruk and Kenny Mayne could teach Peyton "Cut that meat!" Manning about being funny. The golden-armed champion, as he has proved as a pitcher, needs no laugh track.

Back in March, Manning went where no athlete-comedian had gone before on the humor trail—he absolutely killed as host of *Saturday Night Live*. There were many

highlights, but his United Way spoof was one of the funniest *SNL* skits in, oh, ever. The words "Get your head out of your ass! You suck!" had never been spoken so powerfully.

"I can't even look at you!" Manning barked at the boy who had run a bad route and been flattened by a laser throw to the back of his head. Then he banished him to the Port-o-Let for 20 minutes. Wonder if that ever happened to Edgerrin James?

Another guy who surprisingly took funny to the bone: Dwyane "Sexyyy" Wade, star of the T-Mobile ads that ran 1.4 billion times during the NBA playoffs. "That was impressive," he said to Charles Barkley before a *Seinfeldian* deadpan, "the way you squeezed into those tiny little shorts." Yeah, what the heck—we'll let this guy be in our Five.

Don't just stand there

Take a load off ... and enjoy some of the primo vantage points in all of sports



Raise the rooftops Wrigleyville, Chicago

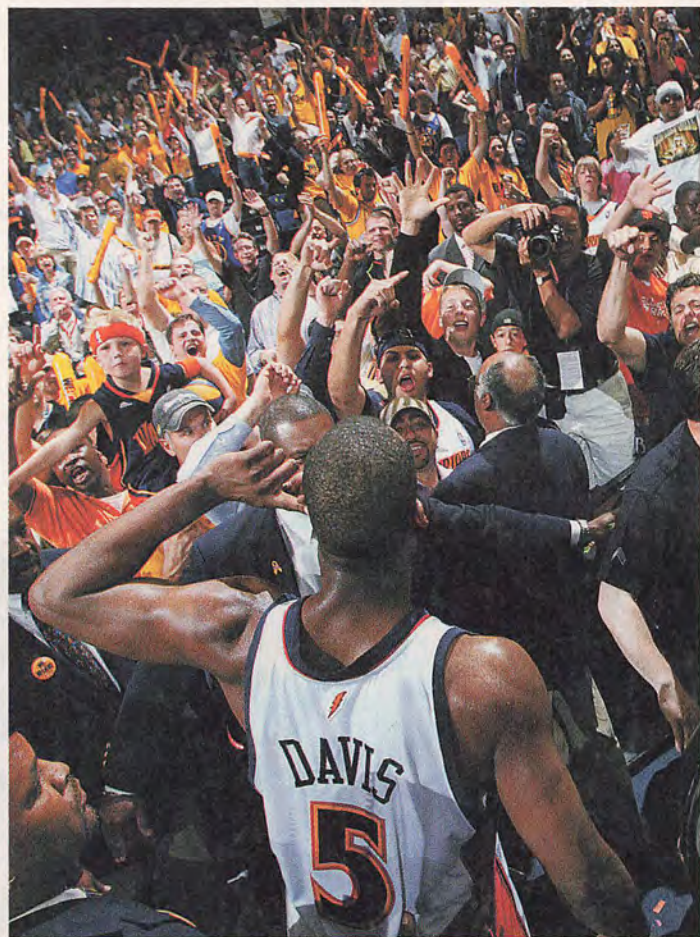
It used to be the owners of the apartment buildings across Waveland and Sheffield avenues from Wrigley Field made a killing thanks to their rooftop views. Some of those owners were immigrants who had purchased buildings (and lived in them) back before the neighborhood boomed in the mid-1980s thanks largely to a reawakening of Cubs fans.

The hawkish Cubs are in on the action now, robbing the process of some of its charm. But you shouldn't lug such a concern with you to the rooftops—why spoil your own fun like that?



This glorious view is from 3639 N. Sheffield, where an all-inclusive ticket can be had for \$125, give or take a few bucks depending on the size of your group. Capacity is 175, and patrons are plied with food (burgers, Chicago char dogs, brats, etc.), beer and wine.

You're too far away to see a ball caught up against the right field wall, and certainly too far away to catch a home run—but you *are* closer to Harry Caray. Besides, no place is perfect. This comes much closer than most. —S.G.



Warrior spirit Oakland

Ronnie Lott knows a few things about big games. But it was another Bay Area team that provided the 49ers legend with the best seat he has had in more than 25 years.

In late April and early May, Lott sat in the same Oracle Arena court-side seats he has held since 1984. The pulsing frenzy of the eighth-seeded Warriors' upset over the top-seeded Mavericks provided him with the kind of sports experience that defies description—almost. "Think of the best entertainer you ever watched," Lott says. "The one that always gets the hair up on the back of your neck. The one that makes you sing, clap, dance. That's what these guys were."

The Warriors' five home playoff games continually challenged fire codes and four times set a record for the largest crowd assembled in California to watch basketball. "These guys were moving mountains," Lott says, "and it was like everyone in the building felt they could move mountains, too." —Sean Deveney

Deep in the 'Hawks nest Lawrence, Kan.

The Kansas basketball players lounge does not appear a whole lot different from similar rooms at a lot of big-time universities. There are plush leather couches good for grabbing a quick nap or catching a few minutes of competitive basketball—NBA or college, doesn't matter—on the big-screen TV.

What's different about KU's room is that it's about 75 steps from the floor at Allen Fieldhouse. The building is more than 50 years old, but this sweet little piece of modernity is tucked deep inside. You go through one door and you're in the vast 21st-century locker room. You go through another and you're in the 1950s-era Fieldhouse halls, where students camp out for the best seats at Jayhawks games. —*Mike DeCourcy*



Spartan? Not this place East Lansing, Mich.

There's room for 30. High-back leather seats. Full stereo surround sound. Wireless Internet. And, of course, the huge wide-screen TV at the center of it all.

If there's a comfier place in America to get your tail chewed for missing a defensive rotation, we haven't found it.

This is Michigan State basketball's video room at the Breslin Center. More than 1,000 MSU games are available on the video system's server, and there are pictures of great Spartans moments all around.

"The players love it," coach Tom Izzo says. "They can come in on their own, sit and watch film. Sometimes they'll stick around and watch an NBA game on the satellite. That's what I like about it. It's a place to hang around in, too." —*M.D.*



Dome away from home South Bend, Ind.

Virtually every Notre Dame student buys season football tickets, and I was no exception—I didn't want to miss cramming onto wooden bleachers and dancing a jig with 10,000 kids clad in the same green T-shirt.

I didn't want to miss learning the cheers with my fellow freshmen seated in the end zone, and I didn't want to miss halftime marshmallow fights with my fellow seniors seated above the 40. You

could get kicked out of the stadium for tossing those puffy projectiles, but the army of yellow-hatted ushers never stopped my friends and me, after a beer (or eight), from hoisting one another up for post-touchdown crowd pushups.

If we dropped anyone, it was forgiven by the end of the game, when the entire student section locked arms and swayed to the alma mater. The song's final line—*Love thee, Notre Dame*—never failed to bring chills down this Domer's spine. —*Jim Ryan*



Monster ball

Boston

I'm not a bleachers kind of guy. I liken them to end zone seats, where you supposedly experience the wonders of watching plays develop and you can focus on the pulling left guard.

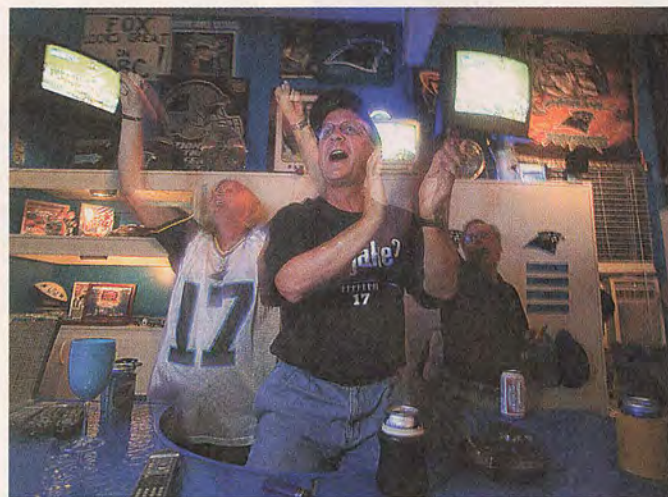
Wow.

OK, the seats atop Fenway Park's Green Monster aren't bleachers—not at \$140 a pop. But as a field box kind of guy who has seen games in 42 major league parks, I nearly spit up my Cracker Jack four years ago upon hearing about the desecration of Fenway with the installation of the Monster seats.

Yet, strangely, the thought of sitting atop a baseball icon is beginning to yank at me. It's not the appeal of seats that look and feel like swivel bar stools, with a barlike counter in front of them (not a bad thing, actually). It certainly isn't the lure of the view, although those who sit up there rave about it.

What it is, is a baseball history thing. Images of the Splendid Splinter down below, Dent muscling up, Fisk ramming the ball off you-know-what.

Who knows, maybe I could sit up there and echo what one of the first Monster seat-holders said: "I got to touch the foul pole!" —*Joe Hoppel*



Cindy and Bill celebrate a big play for the Panthers ... or maybe they're just happy to be there.

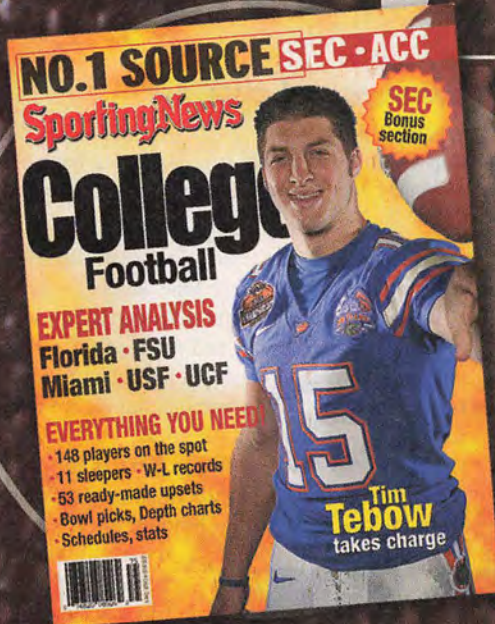
The Garage Mahal Charlotte

As Bill Buchanan tells the story, you begin to feel his pain. "What I needed but didn't have," he says, "is a place to smoke my cigars, drink beer and watch football."

No one should endure such horror. So 12 years ago, Buchanan and his soon-to-be wife, Cindy, began work on the mother of all garages—the Panthers-watching paradise where cars don't dare show their greasy grilles. Instead, up to 70 of the Buchanans' dearest friends watch Panthers road games there amid six televisions (including a 47-inch high-def flat screen), two stocked bars, two beer-filled fridges, a pair of 8-foot-tall memorabilia displays, individual lockers for guests and a rug with a 22-foot Panthers logo on it. Oh, yeah, and air conditioning.

The Buchanans—season-ticket holders—have yet to miss a home game since the Panthers moved to Charlotte, but road games are every bit as special. "It's extremely satisfying to have that many people you care about pulling together for something," Bill says. "It's a spiritual experience." —S.G.

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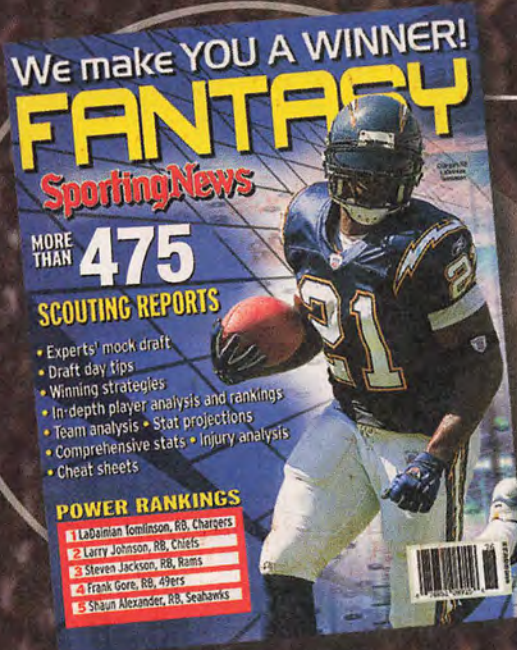
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Yummy, yummy in our tummy

Take us out to the ballgame ...
and don't bring us back
'til we've busted a gut
with our all-time ballpark faves



BOB HILLE

Rocky Mountain oysters

Where: Coors Field

Why Bob: Mr. Starting 5 visits Denver, where he lived during high school and college, every year and always hits the ballpark.

You know, I know, all God's children know by now what Rocky Mountain oysters are. But few have paused to think about what this dish stands for, beyond a very bad day for male cattle.

Look, ballpark nachos are about as Mexican as *Cinco de Mayo* at Chevy's. But a straight line can be drawn from the West's cattle-ranching roots to the calf fries served up at Coors Field. Even suburbanites can be proud celebrants of our pioneer past.

So wince if you will, Deep-Fried Twinkie Nation, at what I pop in my mouth—cut like French fries, batter-fried and dipped in a good horseradishy cocktail sauce—but at least appreciate the irony as you happily nosh on your hot dog vaguely described as “all-beef” (note, it's not “all-sirloin”).

To do anything less is, well, nuts.

SEAN DEVENNEY

Sausage and chowder

Where: Fenway Park

Why Sean: He hails from Lynn, Mass., just north of Boston, and might trade all his NBA expertise for another Sox championship.

As a kid, the ride from Wonderland to the Kenmore stop on Boston's Green Line seemed to take forever. It would take a few minutes for my dad, brother and me to emerge from the soot and sweat of the subway station and get acclimated to being in the big city. By the time we turned on to Brookline Avenue, though, we were not just in the city—we were at a ballgame.

Our noses would tell us that. First, onions and peppers sizzling in oil, followed by the sweet spice of fennel wafting from the browned casings holding the finest of ballpark meats—Italian sausages outside Fenway Park. To this day, the rotund, mustachioed fella holding the tongs and a slightly crusty French roll, shouting, “Shweet Italians hee-ah!” brings out my inner 10-year-old.

As an adult, though, I suggest saving room. Inside the park, local institution Legal Sea Foods offers its own institution, clam chowder, the same version that has been served at presidential inaugurations since 1981. “Chowdah” snobs may scoff because Legal is a chain, but LSF makes a cup of the stuff the right way—with Cape Cod littleneck clams, salt pork and plenty of cream (don't even think about tomatoes, Manhattanites).

Sausages and chowder may not be a pairing fit for Chez Robert, but, hey, it's a ballpark.



MIKE DeCOURCY

Primanti Bros. sandwich

Where: PNC Park

Why Mike: He lived in the Pittsburgh area for the first 32 years of his life. “I was 4 months old when Maz hit his homer,” Mike dutifully reports.

The best thing about a Primanti Bros. sandwich is there's so much stuff on it. For me, once called Plastic Tongue by a foodie-type former boss, the worst thing is there's so much stuff on it.

Invented in the 1930s as a fast meal for truck drivers moving produce through the Pittsburgh Strip District, the Primanti's sandwich seems to have been designed for consumption at PNC Park: your choice of meat, french fries, sliced tomatoes and cole slaw all stuffed between two thick slices of Italian bread. There is nothing like it anywhere else, which just shows how regres-





STAN McNEAL

Rubio's fish taco

Where: Petco Park

Why Stan: Our Stan the Man—part MLB Insider, part eating machine—lived in San Diego from 1985-2000.

Combine a filet of beer-battered whitefish with shredded cabbage, salsa and white sauce, plunk it all on a soft corn tortilla and what do you get? A concession tasty enough to be considered one of our best ballpark eats, of course. The fish taco. A treat that's as much San Diego as the ocean. Don't leave Petco Park without trying one. (The shrimp burritos aren't bad, either.)

The proof is in the pudding. Well, in the case of San Diego's most famous fish taco—introduced more than 20 years ago by Rubio's—that could be the half-yogurt, half-mayo white sauce or the cilantro-based salsa.

Either way, the key to a successful fish taco experience is the tortilla. As important as its freshness is its thickness. Too stale means too chewy. Too thin and all those ingredients might fall in your lap.

You don't want to end up all wet like that, even in an ocean paradise.

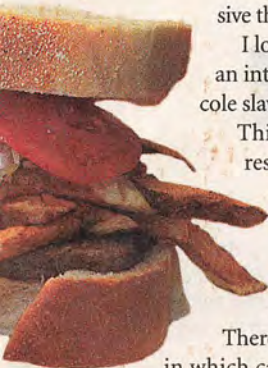
sive the rest of the baseball world can be.

I love Primanti's. My first Primanti Bros. sandwich was like an introduction to Pittsburgh manhood. But I do not care for cold slaw.

This is no problem at the dozen regular Primanti Bros. restaurants in Western Pennsylvania. They might sneer a little, but they'll serve your Pitts-burger cheese steak without the slaw. With business so brisk at PNC Park—Aramark general manager Steve Musciano says Primanti's sandwiches rank behind only hot dogs and nachos—they like to serve 'em as they make 'em.

There are three ways around this: Catch them at a slow time, in which case they'll usually be accommodating; order after the sixth inning, when special orders are encouraged; or send up your lovely wife to smile and ask sweetly.

That has worked many times.



STEVE GREENBERG

Old Style beer

Where: Wrigley Field

Why Steve: He has consumed hundreds of MRDs—meals ready to drink—at Wrigley, which sits a hop, skip and a Clark Street bus ride from where he grew up.

No, thanks, I'll pass on the Sam Adams, the Pete's, the Blue Moon. But I'd be glad to find a tiny umbrella for you to stick in your "beer."

If you're going to buy me a round, make it a "Chicago's beer." Make it an Old Style ... or, as I've shouted in the general direction of many a vendor, an Old Pile!

You can't beat it on a cold day; you can only hope to contain it, for Wrigley men relieve themselves in troughs that are nothing less than despicable. Old Style—which I've heard ridiculed in at least 50 languages—really is quite wonderful. It's smooth, rich and flavorful—a much better beer than the standard watery domestic and far more ballyard-appropriate than the increasingly popular pretty-boy domestics.

Moreover, it is *the* Wrigley beer—has been since 1950. If true Cubs fans can swallow a losing streak that dates back to 1908, we sure as heck can chug-a-lug an Old Style or four and feel like we're in heaven.

SN



Mmmm—layer upon layer of heart-stopping goodness.

A Philly story: Beat up but full-bellied

My friend Jim went to Philadelphia recently. During his first 24 hours there, he went to Independence Hall, got hit by a bicyclist while crossing the street and ate a Schmitter during a game at Citizens Bank Park. Of the three, he liked the last experience best.

What's a Schmitter? A traditional Philly steak and cheese sandwich topped with fried salami, fried onions, tomato and a secret sauce—all on a Kaiser roll. Because it is sold at the ballpark, many folks think the Schmitter is named in honor of Mike Schmidt, the Phillies' Hall of Fame third baseman. In reality, it originated at McNally's Tavern, where a regular who drank Schmidt's Beer ordered his sandwich that way.

"I give it an 'A,'" says Jim.

It beat the seven hours he spent in the hospital emergency room and the nine stitches he received over his eye after the bike mishap. —Dennis Dillon



FROM TOP: JAY DROWNS / SN; BOB LEVERONE / SN (2)



Pleased to meat you

A giant grill. Ten provincial delights from the football tailgating world. And one Commish dishing out the commentary. Let's get cookin'.

For **Joe Cahn**, chasing tailgates is a way of life. According to his website, tailgating.com, "The Commissioner of Tailgating" has visited 40 to 50 pro and college football stadiums a year since



selling his New Orleans School of Cooking in 1996. Only he never seems to make it inside for the games. "Too busy tailgating," he says. "It's a tough job, but somebody's got to do it."

1 Salmon *Seattle*

"In the great Northwest, salmon is king. Although salmon steak is great, that side of freshly caught king salmon on the grill—with butter and lemon—will make you happy to tailgate in the rain."

2 Flank steak *San Diego*

"Throw it on the grill and serve it on tortillas with some pico de gallo and maybe some guacamole. It's time to party and so easy to clean up."



3 Corn in the husk *Iowa City; Lincoln, Neb.*
"Most people boil corn, but in these parking lots they grill it. Fresh-picked from the field that morning and on the grill before the game—well, it don't get no better than that."

4 Stuffed jalapenos *Houston*
"Stuff some cream cheese in there and some shrimp or minced ham. And then slow-cook while you complain about all that's wrong with the team."

5 Pork ribs *Kansas City*
"They can be found anywhere, but in K.C. they're everywhere—dry rub, with sauce, plain, marinated or any which way. That's not a smoke signal coming from Arrowhead—that smoke is pure BBQ."

6 Brats *Chicago, Green Bay*
"Packers and Bears fans have bragging rights for the most popular sausage on the grill at tailgates today. Should they be boiled in beer before they're grilled? Sauerkraut with that mustard? Those are the big questions."

7 Lobster *Boston*
"At a New England tailgate, this is the food of choice. Lobster with a pan of butter on the side—are you kidding me? No wonder the fans come early and stay late."

8 New York strip *East Rutherford, N.J.*
"Where's the beef? At the Meadowlands, that's where. Make these juicy steaks rare—these are football fans."

9 Oysters on the half shell *Baton Rouge, La.*
"Freshly shucked Louisiana oysters topped with butter, garlic, parsley and grated cheese—with some French bread for sopping. Only an SEC championship for LSU could top this."

10 Whole pig *Miami*
"Some claim it's Cuban; others claim it's a Southern thing. I don't care who's right because there's enough for everybody to make a pig of themselves. The only real debate: Apple or no apple?"

No. 1: **MOTOWN IS THE TOWN**

No one was drinking any bubbly—but many a glass was raised in a year filled with winning

Say this about your sports teams, Detroit: They reflect the show-up-for-work-every-day-and-punch-the-clock roots of your city. And in a Best Sports City year in which championship cities' "sportfolios" had gaps, Detroit's regular-season efforts and *this* close success in the playoffs pushed it to the top of our annual rankings, even sans title of any kind.

Visit Detroit these days and you'll see that this is a baseball city out of hibernation and filling Comerica Park. The Pistons and WNBA's Shock put a spring in a hoops fan's step. Yes, it's still Hockey-town, same as it was when Detroit was our Best Sports City in 1998. Yet on an unseasonably warm Saturday in April, with the Wings facing the Flames in the playoffs at The Joe, you were as likely to see an old English "D" on a cap in downtown Detroit (the Tigers were playing the White Sox) as you were a winged wheel on a red sweater.

This is a city immersed in its teams, living and dying with them—mostly living, but there's even a hint of optimism about ... the Lions?

So, pop the World Series bubbly, St. Lou.

Celebrate your Super season, Indy.

Drink from the Cup, Anaheim.

Parade an NBA title down the river, San Antonio.

You each deserve rich notice, same as Gainesville's historic collegiate double dip (see page 29). But, if we're to believe the car ads, then life is as much about the journey as it is the destination, and Motown's sports scene was a trip these past 12 months. Three teams—the Red Wings, Tigers and Pistons—finished no worse than fourth-best in the workaday world of regular-season standings in their respective leagues.

In fact, even with the 3-13 Lions skewing the percentage, Detroit's major professional sports teams in their most recently completed full season won at a .588 clip. How's that for packin' your lunch every day? —Bob Hille



A walkoff for Maggs in the ALCS—not quite a World Series winner but mighty fine indeed.

We were No. 1!

Previous No. 1s in the SPORTING NEWS' annual Best Sports City rankings:

- 2006—Chicago
- 2005—Boston
- 2004—Boston
- 2003—Anaheim-Los Angeles
- 2002—Boston
- 2001—New York
- 2000—St. Louis
- 1999—New York
- 1998—Detroit
- 1997—Denver
- 1995—Denver
- 1994—Cleveland
- 1993—Chicago

Note: There was no Best Sports City in 1996, as the rating system was being expanded and refined.

The Mighty 99

1. Detroit +Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti
2. New York
3. Dallas-Fort Worth
4. Chicago + Evanston
5. Los Angeles
6. Boston
7. Denver + Boulder
8. Phoenix + Tempe
9. Philadelphia
10. Minneapolis-St. Paul
11. Houston
12. Gainesville, Fla.
13. Anaheim
14. Atlanta
15. Miami
16. Nashville
17. Oakland + Berkeley
18. San Diego
19. Indianapolis
20. St. Louis
21. Pittsburgh
22. Salt Lake City + Provo
23. Louisville, Ky.
24. Washington, D.C.
25. San Jose + Palo Alto, Santa Clara
26. Baton Rouge, La.
27. Toronto
28. Seattle
29. Cleveland
30. Cincinnati
31. San Antonio
32. Tampa-St. Petersburg
33. Baltimore
34. Buffalo
35. New Orleans
36. Knoxville, Tenn.
37. Charlotte
38. Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, N.C.
39. Columbus
40. Madison, Wis.
41. Ottawa
42. San Francisco
43. Kansas City
44. Orlando
45. Oklahoma City + Norman
46. Vancouver
47. Milwaukee
48. Jacksonville
49. Calgary
50. South Bend, Ind.
51. Green Bay
52. Sacramento
53. Memphis
54. Montreal
55. Edmonton
56. Portland
57. Austin, Texas
58. Morgantown, W.Va.
59. Boise, Idaho
60. Tallahassee, Fla.
61. Fayetteville, Ark.
62. Lexington, Ky.
63. Blacksburg, Va.
64. Athens, Ga.
65. Auburn, Ala.
66. Eugene, Ore.
67. College Station, Texas
68. College Park, Md.
69. Winston-Salem, N.C.
70. Piscataway, N.J.
71. Tucson, Ariz.
72. Clemson, S.C.
73. West Lafayette, Ind.
74. Pullman, Wash.
75. Lawrence, Kan.
76. Lubbock, Texas
77. Honolulu
78. Columbia, S.C.
79. Lincoln, Neb.
80. Reno, Nev.
81. Tulsa, Okla.
82. Stillwater, Okla.
83. State College, Pa.
84. East Lansing, Mich.
85. Tuscaloosa, Ala.
86. Corvallis, Ore.
87. Charlottesville, Va.
88. Columbia, Mo.
89. Bloomington, Ind.
90. Iowa City, Iowa
91. Manhattan, Kan.
92. Syracuse, N.Y.
93. Oxford, Miss.
94. Storrs, Conn.
95. Las Vegas
96. Hattiesburg, Miss.
97. Colorado Springs, Colo.
98. Starkville, Miss.
99. Birmingham, Ala.

Is your city missing? Go to sportingnews.com and check out Nos. 100 through 150. Still not there? Tell us what you think (or wait 'til next year).

How we arrive at our rankings

We take a 12-month snapshot, roughly July to July, of each city's sports, putting a heavy premium on regular-season won-lost records (from the most recently completed season); playoff berths, bowl appearances and tournament bids; championships; applicable power ratings; quality of competition; overall fan fervor as measured in part by attendance as percentage of venue capacity; abundance of teams, though we reward quality over quantity; stadium and arena quality; ticket availability and prices; franchise ownership; and marquee appeal of athletes.

Swamped with success

Football and basketball titles in the same school year? SN senior writer and, yes, Florida grad Matt Hayes knows firsthand how Gainesville is exulting—with a frosty one at the Salty Dog.

We begin with a news conference. With a troubled soul of a coach awkwardly explaining how one road led to the next and then, shockingly, how it wound up back home. He's sorry, he says. He's back where he wants to be.

And Titledown rejoiced. It just so happened that word of Billy Donovan's return to the Florida Gators in June leaked out on a Wednesday—which, of course, is Beer Fest Night at the Salty Dog Saloon. Go figure.

Donovan's faux pas with the NBA's Orlando Magic has been the only hiccup in a year of the unfathomable for the Florida Gators and the city of Gainesville. Unfathomable, as in the first Division I program to hold football and basketball national titles in the same school year and the first back-to-back national basketball champions in 15 years.

Gainesville, which once held the unofficial title of the nation's No. 1 college party town, is now clearly the center of the college sports world. "This university, this city," Donovan says, "is home."

From the Salty Dog (if you've got any backbone, you'll take the Beers From Around the World challenge) to the Swamp (a dive of a bar across the street from, well, The Swamp) to all points around and between, it has been one wild year to be a Gator. Especially considering where things used to be.

Titledown was Traumatown not so long ago. What a strange, surreal ride it has been.

Three years ago, the Gators had a football coach fighting with fraternities and losing to the Mississippis. And a hoops coach who couldn't get out of first gear in the NCAA Tournament.

The guy in charge of this utter mess was athletic director Jeremy Foley, a heavy hitter who agonizes over every loss by any of the teams on campus. Now imagine the call he had to make in 2004 to his best friend, Ron Zook, the coach of the football team that had just lost to a Mississippi State team that one month earlier had lost



Corey Brewer, Joakim Noah and Lee Humphrey didn't have too much trouble with Ohio State. The football Gators, on the other hand, absolutely destroyed the Buckeyes.



to I-AA Maine.

Florida has a close group of coaches; many live in the same subdivision of Gainesville. Stop by Napolitano's after a home victory and you just might see them celebrating with the city's best Italian food. "It's never easy firing coaches," Foley says. "They're family."

Yet Zook's dismissal set everything in motion. Foley convinced Urban Meyer—the game's hottest young coach—to bypass his dream job, Notre Dame. "It was Jeremy Foley," Meyer says. "He is why I am here."

In March 2005, Donovan's Gators lost to Villanova in the NCAA Tournament—the team's fifth straight first-weekend exit since a Final Four run in 2000. Instead of following his coaching-change mantra—"what should be done eventually must be done immediately"—Foley ignored the grumbling in Gainesville and forged ahead with Donovan.

Two years later, Foley was sitting at a news conference with Donovan, two grown men

crying as they spoke of the coach's departure for the NBA after winning consecutive championships. Who could have guessed a week later that all would be well again in Titledown?

In three short years, Florida has gone from a football program in disarray to its president standing in front of a pep rally the night before the BCS title game and guaranteeing

a win over heavily favored Ohio State. From a basketball program known for recruiting burger chain All-Americans who leave school early to a team whose three stars turned down NBA millions for a chance to win another national title.

"We're just college kids, man," says Joakim Noah, the face of the NCAA Tournament the past two seasons. "No matter what we do the rest of our life, we will forever be linked to this once-in-forever moment."

A moment that, in this microwave world of who's next, can't be so easily forgotten. The basketball team has no starters returning and will be loaded with freshmen and sophomores. That string of nine consecutive NCAA appearances? In jeopardy.

Meanwhile, the football team has two starters returning on defense, a new quarterback and a ton of questions. And the Gators play in the best league on the planet. What you did then and what you do now are distinctly different matters.

No one ever said life was easy in Titledown. **SN**

After a bumpy start to the season, Cubs ace Carlos Zambrano has returned to form.

Back in the fight

By Stan McNeal

smcneal@sportingnews.com

Carlos Zambrano starts grinning before the question is finished.

"Anyone charge the mound on you lately, or even look at you funny?" "No," says Zambrano, aware his tough-guy rep got a boost after his one-sided fracas with then-teammate Michael Barrett. Then sheepishly, "I don't like to fight."

"But you sure seem to do it well."

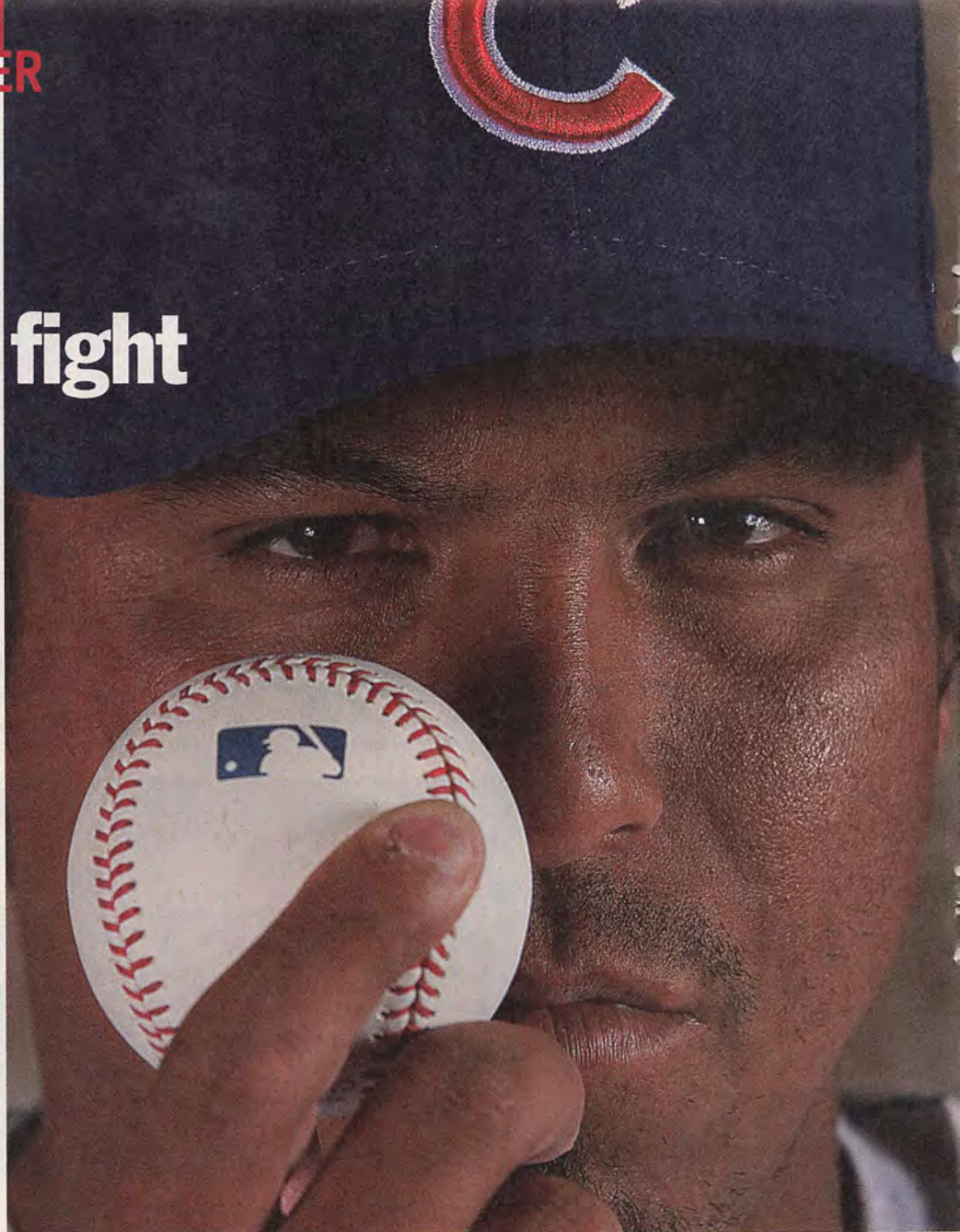
"I've practiced boxing since I was 12. I have gloves in my house," Zambrano says. "I like to practice boxing, but I don't like the fighting."

Since his clash with Barrett on June 1, Zambrano has beaten up nothing but opponents—with his fastball, not his fists. In his past 11 starts, he has allowed a total of 12 earned runs and won nine games, most in the majors over that stretch. Zambrano downplays the impact of the brawl on his turnaround, but admits it provided an opportune time to wipe out memories of the season's first two months. "At some point, you just have to say enough is enough, and when you have the ability, you just have to use your tools," he says.

One of those tools was misaligned early on, and he struggled to a 5-5 start with a 5.62 ERA. The problem was one he has experienced before early in a season: He was pitching from a low slot, which resulted in a flat curve, a sinker that didn't sink and command issues. Once he elevated his arm back to its normal slot, his pitching immediately became sharper. "I was able to throw the first pitch for a strike," he says, "and you have to do that to win."

"He actually left spring training pitching from a good slot," Cubs pitching coach Larry Rothschild says. "I think the problem was concentration more than anything. Sometimes when things aren't going right physically, there could be something going on mentally."

There was. Zambrano is eligible to become a free agent this offseason, and the possibility of signing a contract extension was affecting his performance. He said during spring training he wanted a new deal by opening day, and the Cubs appeared ready to oblige. Then the club



Zambrano has the look of a man who shouldn't be messed with.

went on the market, and talk of an extension stalled. Now Zambrano is content to wait until the offseason, though his agent, Barry Praver, talks occasionally with Cubs general manager Jim Hendry.

"He wants to be here. I want him to be here. That's all I'll say," Hendry says.

Keeping Zambrano in Chicago may not require a Barry Zito-like, seven-year \$126 million deal—Zambrano is willing to give his home team a discount—but he's likely looking at \$15 million or more per year for at least five years. Fifth in the majors with a 3.19 ERA since 2002, Zambrano throws a mid- to high-90s fastball, is durable (he hasn't been on the disabled list in more than five years) and has developed a nice feel for his craft. One red flag: He is on pace to pitch more than 200 innings for a

fifth consecutive season, a heavy load for a 26-year-old. "Anyone that young with that many innings on their arm is likely to be injured at some point," a scout says.

The scout, however, quickly adds that Zambrano is as strong as a heavyweight and as thick as a lineman. As to be expected for someone with his competitive zeal, he wants to be a workhorse. "He's the kind of guy who'd rather pitch every fourth day than every sixth," Rothschild says.

What Zambrano doesn't want is to let talk of a new contract sidetrack his season again. "If they don't want me, some other team will give me the money," he says.

No doubt. A number of teams likely would line up to fight for him—financially, of course.

SN

speedreads



ETA for the next great chase of the home run record: summer 2012.

A-Rod should have more than 700 then, and he'll be turning only 37.

ETA for the next Cooperstown lovefest to rival the one for Cal and Tony: July 2022—Derek Jeter's induction.

ETA for when all the players involved in trade rumors can have their lives back: Anytime—until they clear waivers, that is.

Pick one, any one

Looking for one reason the Cubs have surged into contention? Forget it. There have been a bunch, besides the return of the real Carlos Zambrano.

Winning the close ones. After starting 2-12 in 1-run games, the Cubs since have gone 13-4.

Power located. Free-agent prize Alfonso Soriano has banged 14 homers in the past two months after hitting only four in the first two. Warmer weather and making the adjustment to playing so many day games in Chicago have made the difference.

What a relief. The bullpen, solid all season, turned into one of the club's strengths even with closer Ryan Dempster (oblique) missing three weeks. With Dempster back, the Cubs were one of the few contenders that did not need bullpen bolstering before the trading deadline.

Lou's lineups. Since the club broke camp, new manager Lou Piniella has overhauled the most important part of any lineup—the positions up the middle: Center field (Jacque Jones for Soriano), catcher (Jason Kendall for Michael Barrett), shortstop (Ryan Theriot for Cesar Izturis) and second base (Mike Fontenot for Mark DeRosa). The play of the new middle infielders has provided the biggest spark.

Lou's blowup. Since his first major tantrum with the Cubs, Piniella's club has the majors' best record. Consider his players—and the rest of the N.L.—awakened.

INSIDE DISH

The Cubs' **Ryan Theriot** is beginning to convince scouts he can be an everyday shortstop. Theriot's strength is offense, but he also has shown steady hands in the field—he had a 48-game errorless streak snapped last week—and energy on the bases with a team-high 17 steals. "He's an over-achieving type like **David Eckstein**," a scout says. "It remains to be seen how consistent he can be, but he is the type of player that things seem to happen when he's on the field." ➤ On the day the Padres (finally) traded RHP **Scott Linebrink** for three minor league pitchers, Rockies RHP **Aaron Cook** picked apart San Diego's hitters in a 74-pitch complete game. Still, going for pitching over offense made sense for the Padres. The newcomers give the franchise needed insurance because several of the club's top Class AAA pitching prospects have been disappointments this season. Three consecutive seasons of 73 appearances may be catching up to Linebrink, whose strikeouts per nine

innings had slipped from last year's 8.1 to 5.0 before he was traded. ➤ The way Brewers 3B **Ryan Braun** has been hitting, a trip to the D.L. likely will cost Astros CF **Hunter Pence** (wrist) the N.L. rookie of the year award. Pence, who briefly led the N.L. in hitting last month, has been out-homered and outhit by Braun, who has played in fewer games. In the A.L., don't give the trophy to Red Sox RHP **Daisuke Matsuzaka** just yet. Orioles RHP **Jeremy Guthrie** is making a strong push. In a stretch of 16 starts, Guthrie failed to last six innings only once, and he allowed more than three runs only twice. His ERA as a starter—2.44—is more than a run better than Dice K's. ➤ DH/1B **Shelley Duncan**'s time with the Yankees may be brief, but

he made the most of it by hitting three homers in two days. "At least now he has given them reason to pay attention in case something else happens," says papa **Dave Duncan**, the Cardinals' pitching coach. ➤ Don't look now, but Cubs RHP **Kerry Wood**'s fastball was touching 94 mph last week and he reported no physical problems after working consecutive days in the minors. ➤ The Phillies wisely wasted no time dealing for **Tadahito Iguchi** to fill in for 2B **Chase Utley**, who broke his right hand when he was hit by a pitch.

Regaining his stroke before the season's end will be a challenge for Utley, who hopes to return within three weeks. Iguchi was hitting .251 for the White Sox at the time of the deal and won't come close to matching Utley's production, but he hit 18 homers last season and has established himself as a solid run producer. ➤ **Jim Palmer** was traveling around the country promoting cholesterol awareness last week before heading to the Hall of Fame induction ceremonies. Palmer, inducted in 1990, says he didn't script his speech like **Cal Ripken** did, and opts instead for notecards. How did he know when to wrap up his speech? "When you hear someone snoring behind you, you know you've gone too long," Palmer says of the Hall of Famers seated behind the podium. "I think it was **Bob Lemon** who was snoring for mine."



It's time to start paying attention to Guthrie.



It's not that bad, Iguchi—get on base and the Philly fans will love you.

BLOG ALERT

"I probably won't actually see Barry Bonds hit his record home run. I'll probably be playing, worrying about and attempting to shape my own history."

Garrett Broshuis may be a Giants farmhand, but it doesn't mean he gets time off to stargaze. He'll also be busy blogging for sportingnews.com.

A low-tech success

As other players increasingly lean on video and detailed swing analysis, Braves outfielder **JEFF FRANCOEUR** thrives with his see-it, hit-it approach *By Ryan Fagan*

Jeff Francoeur knows where the question is headed long before it spills out in the wood-trimmed sanctuary that is the Braves' clubhouse.

"Jeff, I'm talking to hitters about their approach at the plate, and..."

"I've got kind of an interesting approach."

"Well, yeah."

"I've always been a guy who likes to see a pitch and hit it," says Francoeur, Atlanta's rising-star right fielder. "One of my favorite players has always been Vladimir Guerrero because he's not worried so much about how his stance is. All he's worried about is how the bat gets to the ball. That's what I try to do."

It's a simple approach: See it, hit it. Why mess around when you can drop the barrel of the bat on a low fastball and rocket it to an outfield gap? But it's also fair to wonder if, in today's world of slow-motion swing analysis and video iPods, Francoeur's "video, schmideo" attitude is a little short-sighted.

But he's confident the only swing analyzer he needs has a pair of eyes, an MVP trophy and a locker on the other side of the room. Francoeur trusts Terry Pendleton, the Braves' hitting coach. Completely. They spend hours together in the batting cages, then the coach shares what he sees and listens to what his player feels.

Francoeur has a long swing that generates tremendous bat speed and creates a follow-through that conjures images of golfer John Daly, another grip-it, rip-it devotee. Just because Francoeur has a simple approach doesn't mean he has a

simple swing. Some days, he drops his hands too much, or his front hip flies open, or he's too herky-jerky, or he gets pull-happy, or he starts diving over the plate.

Though Francoeur is talented and athletic enough to scratch out hits no matter how he's swinging, it's Pendleton's job to stay on top of his 23-year-old protege and guide him toward some type of consistency. "Jeff's not mechanically sound," says Pendleton, who won the 1991 N.L. MVP

while with the Braves.

"He's always been the guy who walks up to the plate, and the pitch can be low and away and he'll hack at it. There are times when he looks ugly on that, and there are times he'll double into the right field corner with it."

'Jeff's not mechanically sound. The pitch can be low and away and he'll hack at it. There are times when he looks ugly. And there are times he'll double into the right field corner.'

—Braves hitting coach
Terry Pendleton

You can see the respect in Pendleton's eyes and hear it in his voice as he talks about the education of Jeff Francoeur, professional hitter. He's an extremely hard worker, but that doesn't mean working with him is easy. Francoeur is known for being one of the game's most impatient hitters. He walked just 23 times in 162 games last season. But he started working with Pendleton on his patience in January, and with his hitting coach in his ear nearly every day, Francoeur already has walked, well, 27 times. Hey, it's a start, and it's part of the process.

"Jeff is different," Pendleton says. "He's the guy who wants to be up there with the game on the line. And he has the heart to be the guy up there with the game on the line. As far as working with his stance and trying to piece him together, believe me, that's a year-round thing."

SN



Francoeur isn't changing his free-swinging ways—he's just learning to harness them a little.

A monthly statement

Jeff Francoeur has hit just 11 home runs after belting 29 in 2006. But he is on pace to surpass the 103 RBIs he had last season because he has gotten better at avoiding long dry spells. "I'm never going to be a guy that's going to go out and hit .340," Francoeur says, "but I don't feel there's any reason I can't hit .280, .290 every year and .300 sometimes." So far, so good. Francoeur is hitting .293 with his 68 RBIs.

Month	'05	'06	'07
April	—	.216	.306
May	—	.280	.279
June	—	.248	.287
July	.413	.297	.302
August	.312	.266	—
Sept./Oct.	.235	.245	—

Francoeur made his major league debut July 7, 2005.

Fantasy Source

FANTASY DISH

He doesn't draw enough walks and he strikes out too much, but positives clearly outweigh negatives with Tigers OF **Curtis Granderson**, who has definite points-league appeal. He figures to shatter his career high in home runs, and he has 45 other extra-base hits (29 doubles and 16 triples). ➤ Given his struggles as a starter in 2006, **Juan Cruz**'s move to the Diamond-backs' bullpen was necessary—but it figured to kill his value. Instead, he has been lights-out this season, and his 12.3 strikeouts per nine innings give him mixed-league value. ➤ 2B **Ronnie**

Belliard took advantage of an injury to SS **Cristian Guzman** and earned a longer stay with the Nationals; Belliard signed a two-year contract extension, a clear sign he will be a starter for the rest of this season and probably into next year. ➤ Tampa Bay's **Scott Kazmir** appears on the verge of regaining ace status. The talented lefty began the week having won two of his past three starts while posting a 1.83 ERA with 21 strikeouts. Walks are still an issue (he averages 3.0 per game), but that won't matter if opponents can't hit him. Don't fret that Kazmir is on schedule to make five of his remaining starts against Boston; he has pitched extremely well in his career against the Red Sox. ➤ Owners in nonkeeper leagues can't like this split for White Sox rookie 3B **Josh Fields**: a .194 average with three homers and 12 RBIs against righthanders, a .360 average with four homers and 14 RBIs against lefties. ➤ Continue to hold on to Reds RP **Eddie Guardado** (elbow). He appears close



Cruz spells relief with a K—lots of them.

to a return and could be in the mix for saves when he comes off the D.L. ➤ No matter how good Padres RP **Cla Meredith** was last year, N.L.-only owners can't rely on him right now. He entered the week with a 4.31 ERA and 1.48 WHIP, and he's losing prominence in the Pads' bullpen.



5 in your face

1 If you think you have it tough being a Scott Olsen owner, imagine how Olsen feels. You try handing out five walks and a beatdown every fifth day while attempting to elude police.

2 Will someone nudge Prince Fielder, pull the hoagie out of his mouth and tell him it's OK to go deep with someone on base? Nineteen of the Milwaukee slugger's 30 homers have been solo shots.

3 Manny being Manny is one thing; Big Papi trying to be Rickey is another. The next time Boston DH David Ortiz slides headfirst, he will be forced to write an 800-word apology on Curt Schilling's blog.

4 Which will happen first in Oakland: a productive stretch from Dan Johnson or an injury-free month from Eric Chavez? My money is on Johnson. Chavez could be coming to the plate in a full-body cast by mid-August.

5 Daniel Cabrera's "breakout" season has gone about as well as Jason Alexander's post-*Seinfeld* TV career. The big Orioles righthander is on pace to set career highs in walks, losses and fantasy owners' expletives. —Chris Bahr

A Ray of sunshine

Devil Rays LF **Carl Crawford**'s average vs.:

A.L. East opponents	.332
All other opponents	.276
Red Sox	.348

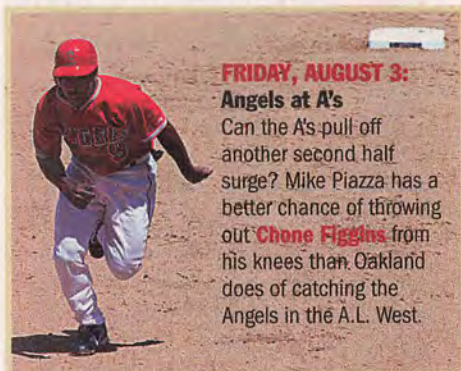
These splits, which reflect Crawford's numbers since the start of the 2005 season, are relevant because the Devil Rays play 50 of their last 75 games against division opponents—15 against the Red Sox. Just imagine if Crawford got to face his own team's pitchers. —Brendan Roberts

DREAMWEEK

August 2-8

THURSDAY, AUGUST 2: Orioles at Red Sox

The Orioles' visit to Boston in mid-May was a disaster, as they blew a 5-0 lead in the ninth inning and lost 6-5. Many argue that it was the beginning of the end for their playoff hopes; others make a strong case that the O's post-season aspirations actually evaporated on opening day.



FRIDAY, AUGUST 3: Angels at A's

Can the A's pull off another second half surge? Mike Piazza has a better chance of throwing out **Chone Figgins** from his knees than Oakland does of catching the Angels in the A.L. West.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 4: Indians at Twins

Something has to give: Indians hitters are among the league leaders in walks, and Twins pitchers are among the stingiest when it comes to handing them out. *Moneyball* nerds must be giddy.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 5: Reds at Pirates

A pair of bitter divisional rivals, two emotionally charged fan bases, a Sunday afternoon ... oh wait, I was thinking Bengals-Steelers.



MONDAY, AUGUST 6: Yankees at Blue Jays

In late May, Alex Rodriguez distracted Blue Jays third baseman Howie Clark enough for an infield popup to fall for a hit. A-Rod claims he yelled "Hah!" when passing Clark. Clark claims he heard "Mine!" Further examination of the footage

has revealed that A-Rod actually was singing "Hey! Hey! You! You!" from **Avril Lavigne's** "Girlfriend."

TUESDAY, AUGUST 7: Braves at Mets

This key N.L. East game gives Julio Franco a chance to exact some revenge on the Mets, who recently released him. Also on Franco's grudge list: Thomas Jefferson and Socrates.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 8: Cubs at Astros

The Cubs are in Texas, which means Mark Cuban is just a short flight away. But he may not find the time to check in on his potential investment because he is putting together a 700-page report on the lousy state of MLB umpiring. —Chris Bahr

Two steps forward

When the Royals beat the Rangers last Sunday, K.C. ensured itself of a second consecutive winning month. The Royals' last winning month before this season: July 2003. The highlight of this July was a 4-2 trip through Boston and Detroit; the Red Sox and Tigers are arguably the best teams in baseball.

A dramatically improved offense is a big reason for the Royals' turnaround. The club carried a .248 team batting average into June but is hitting .281 since. Third baseman Alex Gordon embodies the revival. He hit .185 the first two months and has batted .302 since the start of June. DH Billy Butler, another of the team's building blocks, was one of baseball's best hitters in July.

The team likely will finish with a sub-.500 record for the 12th time in the past 13 seasons, but K.C. is at least closing on the White Sox for fourth place in the A.L. Central. Doesn't sound like much, but when you've lost at least 100 games three years running, it is something. —Kyle Veltrop

A.L. EAST

BALTIMORE ORIOLES The surge of CF **Corey Patterson**, who has hit .387 since the All-Star break, presents a dilemma because he will be a free agent and could be difficult to re-sign. The O's have grown reliant on his defense and basestealing ability. **JULY GRADES: Offense: C** This is a middling group that lacks power. SS **Miguel Tejada's** return should help. **Pitching: B+** The Orioles ranked near the top of the A.L. in ERA during July. The bullpen found stability. **Defense: A** No team in the A.L. has committed fewer errors. —Spencer Fordin

BOSTON RED SOX RHP **Manny Delcarmen** has emerged as a force. Scouts have been raving about his nasty arsenal of pitches for years. The keys for him this season are first-pitch strikes and being more aggressive on the inner half of the plate. RHP **Mike Timlin** has been another big asset for the bullpen of late. **JULY GRADES: Offense: C-** The offense couldn't get in a groove. DH **David Ortiz** struggled to find his power. **Pitching: B** The team continued to get quality work from the rotation and the bullpen. **Defense: B+** **Coco Crisp** played Gold Glove-caliber center field. 2B **Dustin Pedroia** and 1B **Kevin Youkilis** are underrated. C **Jason Varitek** is a rock. —Ian Browne

NEW YORK YANKEES 2B **Robinson Cano** has been working extensively on improving his discipline with hitting coach **Kevin Long**, who has a drill in which Cano



► **JULY STAR:** Orioles LHP **Erik Bedard** was as dominant as any pitcher last month, going 4-0 with a 2.08 ERA. In 34⅓ innings, he struck out 46—to increase his A.L.-leading total to 175—and allowed just 17 hits. Bedard and RHP **Jeremy Guthrie** are becoming quite a 1-2 punch.

does not swing during batting practice so he can get used to taking pitches. Cano had a rare 3-walk game last week. **JULY GRADES: Offense: A** This group fired on all cylinders. **Pitching: B-** The best work came from the relievers, specifically closer RHP **Mariano Rivera**, RHP **Luis Vizcaino** and LHP **Mike Myers**. **Defense: A-** Alex Rodriguez looked fluid and agile at third. —Bryan Hoch

TAMPA BAY DEVIL RAYS The team gave up offense to get pitching by sending IF **Ty Wigginton** to the Astros for RHP **Dan Wheeler**, who needs to regain his touch from when he thrived as a setup man in 2005 and '06. Wigginton became expendable thanks to the emergence of 2B **Josh Wilson**. **JULY GRADES: Offense: B-** B.J. Upton's return added to an already potent offense. **Pitching: D** The bullpen was erratic. **Defense: B** Upton took over in center, which allowed **Delmon Young** to return to right. 3B **Akinori Iwamura** is steady and flashy. —Bill Chastain

TORONTO BLUE JAYS RHP **Roy Halladay** has altered his footing by positioning himself to the first base side of the pitching rubber. The move has helped him find the strike zone more consistently. **JULY GRADES: Offense: B-** The lineup finally was whole but still didn't click. **Pitching: A** The young bullpen continued to excel, and the injury-riddled rotation made up for the offense. **Defense: C** Jays catchers allowed 27 consecutive steals. —Jordan Bastian

FS

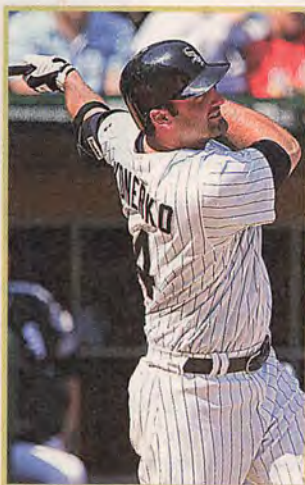
Since the break, White Sox DH **Jim Thome** has been walked 18 times—none intentional—in 19 games. ► Rockies 1B **Todd Helton** is 3-for-19

A.L. CENTRAL

CHICAGO WHITE SOX After one nightmarish performance—eight runs on nine hits in one-third of an inning—at Class AAA, LHP **Andrew Sisco** has found better control as a converted starter. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: B** A slumping offense the first three months began to connect, hitting almost twice as many homers as it did in June. **Pitching: D+** The bullpen continued to struggle, and RHP **Jose Contreras** went 0-4 with an 11.74 ERA. **Defense: B-** CF **Jerry Owens** showed good speed after replacing the injured **Darin Erstad**. —*Scott Merkin*

CLEVELAND INDIANS The club acquired OF **Kenny Lofton** from the Rangers. He won't play center or hit leadoff, like he once did for the Indians, but he brings speed to either corner spot and can provide a 1-2 spark with CF **Grady Sizemore** at the top of the lineup. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: C+** DH **Travis Hafner** didn't show his true colors. **Pitching: D** RHP **Jake Westbrook** and LHP **Cliff Lee** hampered the rotation. **Defense: C+** The infield was a little sloppy, and RF **Trot Nixon**'s lack of mobility was a concern. —*Anthony Castrovince*

DETROIT TIGERS IF **Neifi Perez**'s suspension has given **Ryan Raburn** an opportunity to win a big league utility role. Class AAA hitting coach **Leon Durham** finally was able to instill some plate discipline in the free-swinging Raburn. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: B** CF **Curtis Granderson**



► **JULY STAR:** White Sox 1B **Paul Konerko**'s wretched April—he hit .198 for the month—is becoming a distant memory. He has hit better each subsequent month and entered the week with a .302 mark in July. Konerko's trademark power also has returned.

had season highs in batting average, on-base percentage, slugging percentage and homers. **Pitching: B-** The club didn't have anyone who could shut down opponents in the late innings ahead of closer **Todd Jones**. **Defense: B** SS **Carlos Guillen** had a recent run of errors, but 1B **Sean Casey**'s glove held the infield together. —*Jason Beck*

KANSAS CITY ROYALS RHP **Brian Bannister** has emerged as one of the league's top young pitchers. He doesn't have overpowering stuff, but he is smart and constantly makes adjustments. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: B** The Royals produced against some of the top pitching staffs. **Pitching: B+** RHPs **Joakim Soria** and **David Riske** did great work out of the bullpen. **Defense: B** SS **Tony Pena** and 2B **Mark Grudzielanek** improved their cohesiveness in the middle infield. 3B **Alex Gordon** showed great progress. —*Conor Nicholl*

MINNESOTA TWINS Bunting, a longtime asset to the team's offense, has become a hindrance. 2B **Luis Castillo**, SS **Jason Bartlett** and IF **Nick Punto** have failed to lay down bunts recently, necessitating extra practice. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: C** Inconsistency at the plate wasted many solid pitching performances. **Pitching: B-** LHP **Johan Santana** was good, but the Twins need him to be dominant. **Defense: A-** The team still ranks second in the A.L. in fielding percentage. —*Kelly Thesier*

A.L. WEST

LOS ANGELES ANGELS 1B **Casey Kotchman** is emerging as the offensive force he had been early in the season, and LF **Garret Anderson** is rediscovering his bat speed and timing after a hip injury. ... RF **Vladimir Guerrero** has been in the throes of a home run drought but still is banging line drives. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: D** After exhibiting a robust offense much of the season, the team faltered despite 3B **Chone Figgins**' efforts to get things started. **Pitching: C+** RHP **Kelvim Escobar** was brilliant, but the back end of the rotation struggled. **Defense: C+** Injuries created problems with continuity. —*Lyle Spencer*

OAKLAND ATHLETICS DH **Mike Piazza** has been hot offensively, and a throwing program may eventually enable him to help behind the plate. ... SS **Bobby Crosby**'s broken hand will sideline him at least six weeks; **Marco Scutaro** and **Donnie Murphy** will fill in. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: F** The A's went 11 consecutive games without scoring more than three runs. **Pitching: C** RHP **Dan Haren** and LHP **Lenny DiNardo** were bright spots; RHPs **Chad Gaudin** and **Joe Blanton** weren't. **Defense: B+** Six-time Gold Glover **Eric Chavez** missed time (back stiffness), and rookie C **Kurt Suzuki** struggled. Everyone else was solid. —*Mychael Urban*



► **JULY STAR:** Mariners 3B **Adrian Beltre** had a .419 on-base percentage in his first 25 games of the month, which is 180 points higher than he had for June. Beltre also has been playing Gold Glove-caliber defense for the surprising Mariners.

SEATTLE MARINERS C **Kenji Johjima** has fallen off offensively. He appears to be more pull-conscious than earlier in the season, when his average was well over .300. ... The previously productive **Ichiro Suzuki**-led offense has stumbled since the break. Lack of clutch hitting is a major problem. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: D** More than half of the regulars saw their averages dip 20-plus points. **Pitching: C** To realize his potential, RHP **Felix Hernandez** must control his emotions after a pitch doesn't go his way. **Defense: C** A real shocker: Johjima finally blocked the plate in a key situation. —*Jim Street*

TEXAS RANGERS RHP **Robinson Tejeda** was dispatched to the minors. He was hampered by wildness; the team blamed an erratic delivery. It could be difficult for him to restore his stock because the club wants to look at other pitchers down the stretch. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: C-** The Rangers hit poorly overall, but OFs **Marlon Byrd** and **Brad Wilkerson** were productive. **Pitching: A** RHPs **Kameron Loe** and **Kevin Millwood** steadied the rotation, and the bullpen remained solid. **Defense: B** **Travis Metcalf** played well as a fill-in at third. 1B **Mark Teixeira** was missed while he was on the D.L. —*T.R. Sullivan*

(.158) lifetime against Cubs SP **Carlos Zambrano**. ► Yankees SP **Andy Pettitte** was 2-2 with a 6.96 ERA in July, but he did average 8.4 K's per nine innings.

THE CLOSER Todd Jones

The men behind the manager

In the old days, coaches mainly served as drinking buddies for the manager. These days, they have much more to do. There also are more coaches to go around.

The outfield coach is in charge of—you guessed it—the outfielders. He makes sure they get enough fielding work during batting practice. He will walk around, have a look at the fences and try to get a feel for every nook and cranny in the outfield. Before a series starts, he'll go over spray charts of opposing hitters and then meet with his outfielders to talk about where they should position themselves.

An infield coach's job is much the same, though positioning infielders is a little trickier than outfielders. There's so much to consider. Can the pitcher hit his spots? If he can, it's easier to decide where to position guys. Another factor is the stage of the game. If it's the late innings, the coach may need his guys to guard the lines. Both infield and outfield coaches have a set of signs they use to position their players. It's really

cool to watch coaches orchestrate all the moves during the course of a game.

The pitching coach works with the starter to come up with a game plan. He studies tons of video of opposing hitters, trying to figure out tendencies. He also leads a meeting before the first game of a series to talk about the weaknesses of the opposing hitters.

Our hitting coach, Lloyd McClendon, has similar responsibilities for the offensive side. He studies video of opposing pitchers to see if he can determine any of their patterns. If he can tell our guys what a certain pitcher likes to throw in a certain count, he can give our hitters an advantage. At his meeting, he will talk about how to approach every opposing pitcher.

The bench coach is the manager's right-hand man. Often he's a former manager and the skipper's tightest ally. He's in charge of the flow



Like many managers, the Yankees' Joe Torre leans on his bench coach, in this case Don Mattingly.

of the game and reminds the skipper of how certain scenarios typically have played out. He talks lineup and bullpen avail-

ability with the manager. The bench coach also is the main sounding board for the manager, kind of a filter for ideas.

There also are base coaches and bullpen coaches, and sometimes even a baserunning coach. All of them, for the most part, are situation messengers. They want to get their part of the team moving in the right direction.

The job of being a coach can be thankless. The hours are long and there are plenty of responsibilities. When a team wins, the players get all the credit. When a team loses, the coaches usually are the first to get fired. Crazy, isn't it?

E-mail Tigers reliever Todd Jones at tjones@sportingnews.com.

N.L. EAST

ATLANTA BRAVES A key reason for RHP **Tim Hudson's** success is his hard sinker, which initially looks like a split-finger fastball. Improved mechanics and increased confidence have allowed Hudson to overcome the mediocrity of his previous two seasons. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: A** 3B **Chipper Jones** and SS **Edgar Renteria** were hot. **Pitching: C+** RHP **Rafael Soriano**, once dominant, was a liability. **Defense: B** The right side of the infield occasionally showed its youth, but this is a sure-handed group overall. —*Mark Bowman*

FLORIDA MARLINS IF **Jason Wood** is being used as a late-inning defensive replacement for 1B **Mike Jacobs**. The righthanded-hitting Wood also is getting more starts at first, mainly against lefties. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: A** Despite all the strikeouts, the team ranks second in the N.L. in runs. **Pitching: C** RHP **Sergio Mitre** gave the rotation a boost, but the bullpen was overworked. **Defense: D** The team continued to rank last in the N.L. in fielding percentage. —*Joe Frisaro*

NEW YORK METS The defense hasn't always been an asset to the pitching staff. The injury to fourth OF **Endy Chavez** has hurt, and **Carlos Beltran's** deep positioning in center field leads to a lot of balls dropping in front of him. 1B **Carlos Delgado's** immobility is an ongoing concern. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: B-** The bats awoke from



JULY STAR: Mets LHP **Billy Wagner** doesn't get mentioned as much as he used to when talk turns to baseball's best closer. But check out his numbers for July—8-for-8 in save chances, 0.00 ERA, two hits in nine innings—and you'll wonder why.

a slumber in the middle of the month. **Pitching: B** The bullpen was reliable. RHP **John Maine** and LHP **Oliver Perez** were more consistent. RHP **Jorge Sosa** was less so. **Defense: B-** SS **Jose Reyes** played like a Gold Glover. The rest of the defenders were average. —*Marty Noble*

PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES RHP **Jose Mesa** no longer piles up strikeouts or blows away hitters, but his velocity still is respectable because he keeps his legs strong. Mesa, 41, recently became the 11th pitcher to appear in 1,000 career games. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: A** 1B **Ryan Howard**, 2B **Chase Utley**, CF **Aaron Rowand** and SS **Jimmy Rollins** led the way. **Pitching: C-** The staff ranked among the worst in the N.L. in ERA. **Defense: B-** Left field and the corner infield spots faltered at times, but this remained a team strength. —*Ken Mandel*

WASHINGTON NATIONALS 3B **Ryan Zimmerman** already has as many errors as he did last season, but manager **Manny Acta** isn't complaining about his defense. Acta often praises Zimmerman for saving runs with his diving plays and for getting to balls that most third basemen don't get to. **JULY GRADES:** **Offense: D-** Clutch hitting was virtually nonexistent, again. **Pitching: B-** The starters gave the Nationals a chance to win almost every game. **Defense: A-** Great plays were consistently turned in all month. —*Bill Ladson*

N.L.CENTRAL

CHICAGO CUBS RHP Jason Marquis has been issuing ill-timed walks. He gets in trouble when he overthrows and strays from his off-speed stuff. **JULY GRADES: Offense: B** The home runs were down, but clutch hits were plentiful. **Pitching: A** Entering the week, the staff had the best ERA in baseball for the month. **Defense: B+** The defense behind the plate improved significantly. —Carrie Muskat

CINCINNATI REDS RHP Matt Belisle has had several lousy outings lately, and interim manager Pete Mackanin has been giving the first-year starter quick hooks. Belisle has had poor location and been susceptible to home runs. **JULY GRADES: Offense: B-** 2B Brandon Phillips and LF Adam Dunn had the hottest bats. **Pitching: B** RHP Aaron Harang held up the rotation. **Defense: B-** The Reds moved to the middle of the pack in fielding. —Mark Sheldon

HOUSTON ASTROS The team acquired Ty Wigginton from the Devil Rays for RHP Dan Wheeler and is counting on Wigginton to provide power. He can play all over but likely will get a lot of time at third base now that Morgan Ensberg has been designated for assignment. **JULY GRADES: Offense: C** LF Carlos Lee was steady as usual. 1B Lance Berkman's hand injury hurt his production. **Pitching: C** The bullpen improved slightly. **Defense: C** With SS Adam Everett out, C Brad Ausmus was the only above-average defender. —Alyson Footer



JULY STAR: Cardinals LF Chris Duncan moved into the cleanup spot and started providing 1B Albert Pujols the protection he had been lacking all year. Entering the week, Duncan was hitting .365 with 21 RBIs in July. Most impressive was his .481 on-base percentage.

MILWAUKEE BREWERS There has been some grumbling that RHP Jeff Suppan, who lasted only five innings in four of his first five July starts, isn't pitching deep enough in games. But Suppan averaged 6.0 innings in his first 22 starts, which is more than in his previous two seasons with the Cardinals. **JULY GRADES: Offense: D** 1B Prince Fielder's RBIs fell as Nos. 1 and 2 hitters RF Corey Hart and SS J.J. Hardy slumped. **Pitching: B** Every starter but RHP Yovani Gallardo had an ERA above 4.00. **Defense: B-** 3B Ryan Braun made mistakes but atoned with his bat. —Adam McCalvy

PITTSBURGH PIRATES To improve his control, RHP John Van Benschoten has adjusted his motion so that he stays back longer and uses his hip to propel his delivery toward the plate. **JULY GRADES: Offense: C-** Timely hits disappeared after the break. **Pitching: C+** The bullpen dominated; the rotation was inconsistent. **Defense: B+** The Pirates set a team record for error-free innings. —Jenifer Langosch

ST. LOUIS CARDINALS OF Skip Schumaker and IF Brendan Ryan have made strong statements for next season. They have hit well and provided needed energy. Ryan was sent to Class AAA last week but will be back soon. **JULY GRADES: Offense: B+** The team hit for power and average and drew walks. **Pitching: C** The bullpen hung in nicely despite a heavy workload. **Defense: C** Age and injuries hurt the Cardinals at key spots. —Matthew Leach

N.L.WEST

ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS RHP Micah Owings will remain a starter despite his struggles against hitters the third time through the lineup. Club officials want to see if he can develop his secondary pitches before moving him to the bullpen. **JULY GRADES: Offense: D+** The situational hitting in the first two-plus weeks of the month was atrocious. **Pitching: B+** The starters faltered but picked things back up. The bullpen was consistent. **Defense: B** Mark Reynolds' athleticism makes him solid at third base. —Steve Gilbert

COLORADO ROCKIES SS Troy Tulowitzki's most impressive asset is his arm, but his attention to positioning is underrated. He gets to balls quickly and immediately sets his feet. **JULY GRADES: Offense: B** RF Brad Hawpe and LF Matt Holliday provided power. 2B Kazuo Matsui didn't always counter adjustments made by opponents. **Pitching: B** The rotation was solid and adjusted quickly if the early plan wasn't working. **Defense: A** The Rockies have one of the best fielding percentages in their history. —Thomas Harding

LOS ANGELES DODGERS A future ace, RHP Chad Billingsley has made great strides with improved off-speed pitches to complement his fastball. **JULY GRADES: Offense: A** Bill Mueller's arrival as hitting coach jump-started the offense, particularly the young hitters, who



JULY STAR: Dodgers CF Juan Pierre, after hitting in the .270s in each of the first three months, was batting .299 in July entering the week. Pierre also was successful on 12 of his 13 stolen base attempts. He ranks second in the N.L. with 42.

apparently were intimidated by Eddie Murray. **Pitching: C** Considering the way injuries decimated the staff, the pitchers hung in remarkably well. **Defense: C+** The defenders made the routine plays and didn't cost the team games. —Ken Gurnick

SAN DIEGO PADRES RHP Clay Hensley, who opened the season in the rotation before suffering several injuries, has returned and is pain-free for the first time this year. Hensley can pitch in any number of spots; don't be surprised if he ends up back in the rotation. **JULY GRADES: Offense: C** Brian Giles looks like a keeper at leadoff, and Milton Bradley proved to be a find in left. The offense stranded too many runners. **Pitching: C+** Other than RHP Chris Young, the rotation was so-so. The bullpen looked tired, though closer RHP Trevor Hoffman was on top of his game. **Defense: B** 1B Adrian Gonzalez played Gold Glove-caliber defense. —Corey Brock

SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS During the team's current span of 31 games in 30 days, manager Bruce Bochy plans to rest his regulars more and monitor pitch counts closely. **JULY GRADES: Offense: D** The heart of the order needs a transplant. **Pitching: C** LHP Noah Lowry and RHP Tim Lincecum excelled. The bullpen remained a work in progress. **Defense: B** SS Omar Vizquel is worth the price of admission; 3B Pedro Feliz is underrated. —Chris Haft

It's too early to expect a turnaround at North Carolina.

Davis has everything he needs—except players

By Matt Hayes

mhayes@sportingnews.com

He's a miracle worker, you know. Took a troubled program and righted all wrongs and set up the guy who followed him to win a national championship.

Yep, a miracle worker. Did all that at a program that can't begin to dream of the advantages Butch Davis now has at North Carolina.

"There's a big difference, though," Davis says. And here it is: players.

When Davis took over at Miami in the mid-1990s, the program had been rocked by Dennis Erickson's mismanagement and utter lack of discipline, and NCAA sanctions were on the way. It took a few years, but Davis' hard-line ways paid off with a team that should have played in the 2000 national title game, won the 2001 national title in Larry Coker's first season after Davis left for the NFL and was a play away from winning it all again in 2002.

That team had players from the get-go and was the Big East co-champion in Davis' first two seasons.

His inherited team at North Carolina has:

- One scholarship tailback and all of seven carries—six from a walk-on—returning.

- One quarterback returning. Last season, Cam Sexton completed 41.9 percent of his passes and threw four touchdown passes and eight interceptions.

- One receiver with big-play potential and another who played quarterback at two schools in his previous three seasons.

- Not a single defensive player who will scare anyone.

And a whole lot of questions.

"We're going to compete," says UNC quarterback-turned-widow Joe Dailey. "But there is some reality involved."

The reality is North Carolina's quarterback likely will be T.J. Yates, a redshirt freshman who missed two of his past three years of competition, or Mike Paulus, a freshman who will have all of one month to learn the offense.

The reality is North Carolina is counting on two freshmen—heralded tackle Marvin Austin



Davis has great backing from administrators and fans—and the facilities are first-class.

and defensive back-turned-reality television star Greg Little (*Summer House* on ESPN)—to give its defense some oomph.

The reality is—despite immaculate facilities, unwavering administrative support and renewed fan interest—this team is far from what Davis inherited at Miami in 1995. The miracle worker has inherited a team that was a blocked extra-point attempt from losing to rival Duke—one of two winless Division I teams in 2006.

In other words, don't expect miracles. At least not yet.

"If I know Butch, things will change quicker than you think," says new Miami coach Randy Shannon, who was Davis' linebackers coach for three seasons with the Hurricanes.

The reality is things can't change quickly enough. **SN**

BLOG ALERT

'I have Nebraska first in the North—I don't want to bury Big Red yet. I like OU to win the South. I think the defense will carry the Sooners.'

Tell Tom Dienhart what you think of his Big 12 picks at sportingnews.com.

INSIDE DISH

Look for LSU FB **Jacob Hester** to play more at running back this fall now that RB **Alley Broussard** has announced he will not play. The plan was to get Hester more touches in one-back spread sets because of his receiving ability, but now he'll get more carries behind a lead blocker. Talented sophomore **Keiland Williams** is the team's starter and will be one of the SEC's best. ➤ **Willie Williams**, he of the 11 arrests before signing with Miami three years ago, is enrolled at Louisville and will compete for a starting spot in fall camp. He's a natural weakside linebacker—he had nine sacks in four games last year at Los Angeles Community College. If Williams wins a spot, the Cardinals might move WLB **Preston Smith** to the middle to get more experience and speed inside. ➤ The ACC is concerned about its championship game, which was uninspiring the past two seasons, losing corporate value and television ad revenue. Conference administrators are torn between keeping the game in Florida (Jacksonville, Tampa or Orlando), which helps all of the schools' recruiting efforts there, or moving it to Charlotte beginning in 2008. A move to Charlotte would put the game in the middle of the league's geographical footprint and likely would mean better attendance. But league coaches don't like the possibility of playing a championship game in cold and/or wet weather.

speedread

Tim Donaghy's alleged gambling problems—including betting on games he officiated—impact more than just officials in the NBA. They affect every sport at every level. Fair or not, all of those questionable calls over the years—the interference play in the 2002 national title game, the Oregon-Oklahoma debacle last season—can now be explained by conspiracy nuts. One sorry sod shouldn't taint an entire profession.

The guy they called The Kid is a father now—and closer to 40 than 30.

Gordon is back in the race to catch the greats

By Mike Hembree

At every stop on the Nextel Cup tour, one part of the pre-race ceremony is much the same. As the starting lineup is introduced, drivers walk across a stage to cheers and/or boos or general disinterest, and several stop to pick up some goofy award from the previous week's race.

Photographers generally snooze through much of this exercise. But every one of them perked up last month at Daytona when Jeff Gordon, the race's pole sitter, was introduced. Joining Gordon on stage as part of a celebration of former Daytona 500 champions were Richard Petty and Darrell Waltrip.

This was a photo for the ages, as Gordon stood in the middle of two other giants of the sport and put his arms around them. There were smiles all around.

These men not only are among the select drivers who know what it's like to win stock car racing's biggest event, they also live in a more exclusive neighborhood. They are three of only five living men—Cale Yarborough and David Pearson are the others—who have won three or more Cup championships.



Gordon (center) has joined Waltrip (left) and Petty on the list of NASCAR's greatest drivers. But he has work to do to get on top of the roll of champions.

Petty won seven championships, Gordon has four (his last in 2001) and Waltrip won three.

Since Gordon made his strength known in the mid '90s—he won championships in 1995,

'97 and '98 and finished second in '96—observers have placed him in rare air. He is the only driver—and will be the only one, at least for quite a few years—to have a reasonable shot at reaching the high ground of NASCAR championships, that space occupied only by Petty and the late Dale Earnhardt.

Earnhardt also won seven championships and was in hot pursuit of No. 8 when he died in the 2001 Daytona 500. He had mentioned to friends that the eighth championship was his

last goal and that he had every intention to retire when he reached that number.

Gordon is too smart to signal for public consumption that he has designs on records of this sort. He will turn 36 on Saturday, and he now is a father. If he races past 40, there is a question of how much of a factor he might be. Drivers past 40 have found it difficult to reach victory lane in recent

seasons. Supremely talented, Gordon could be a very loud exception to the trend, but statistics wouldn't be on his side.

If Gordon is reaching toward the number

RUSTY BURROUGHS FOR SI

Every lap matters.

Denny Hamlin rules Pocono. Last year he swept both races, but with the Car of Tomorrow can he step up again this weekend, or will Team Hendrick continue its dominance of the COT races? No matter what, with its wide-open racing and infamous "Tunnel Turn," the tri-oval will be the real king.



at Pocono

Presented by Rush Hour 3

Sun., 1:00pm ET **ESPN**

Also available on ESPN HD



at Montreal Sat., 2:30pm ET **ESPN 2**

Also available on ESPN2 HD



seven, he obviously must begin with a fifth championship, and he clearly is the favorite as the season moves into its concluding months. Through 20 races, Gordon had four victories and 18 top 10s and an impressive 371-point lead in the Nextel Cup standings despite a 100-point penalty for some recent technical foolishness.

The Chase format will eliminate most of Gordon's points advantage, but considering the sort of season he's having, that might not matter. **SN**

Mike Hembree is an associate editor for *NASCAR Scene*. Read more from Hembree at scenedaily.com.

SPEED reads

Imagine the best day of your life. Imagine more than 200,000 people cheering as you do whatever it is that makes it the best day of your life. Then imagine getting paid \$488,111 to do that thing you do. In other words, Tony Stewart won at the Brickyard again.

Before I declare the new DEI-Ginn merger a superteam, as a lot of the media have done already, I'd like to know this: How do two not-great teams separately equal one great team together? If you add two decent cars to a pair of mediocre cars, you don't get any great ones.

If you get this magazine—and there's a good chance you won't, seeing as how Toyota won a Busch race and that, along with the "Los Angeles" Dodgers, 2-point conversions and the 3-point line is one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—take note of this prediction: Toyota will not win in a Nextel Cup race this season.

ESPN returned to NASCAR coverage with an overwrought prerace show (Was it a race or the Olympics? Enough with the slow, somber music and dramatic shots of corn!) and an I-don't-know-what-to-call-it attempt to show "dirty air." All I know is, the cars looked like Pigpen.

—Matt Crossman

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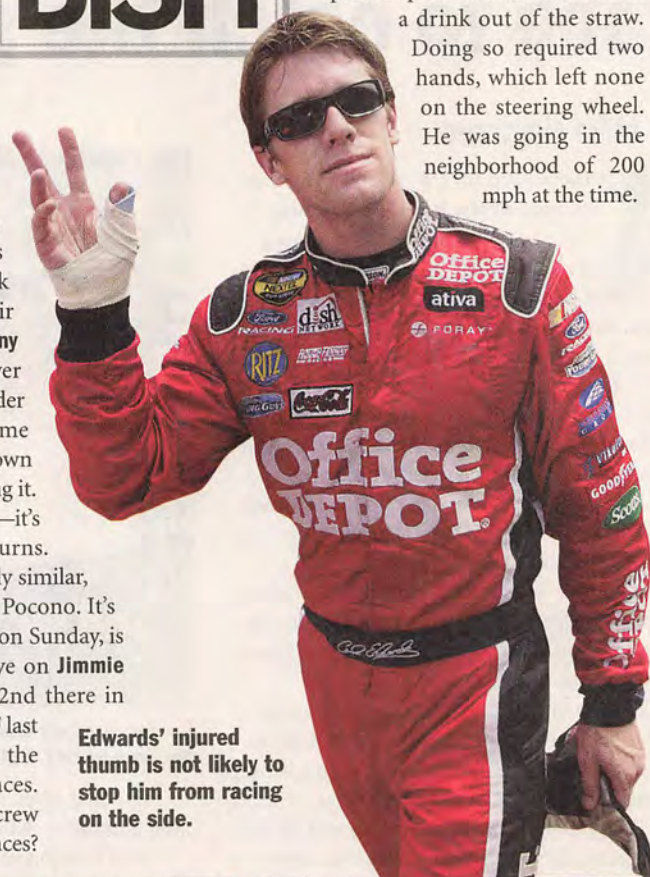


Carl Edwards dislocated his thumb running in a just-for-kicks race that also featured his dad and brother. The injury was not serious enough to force him to miss time in the Busch or Cup series. Many drivers run "little" races like that all the time as a way to have fun, release energy, give back to fans or just because they are addicted to racing and would be getting themselves in trouble if they didn't keep busy. Whatever the reason, there will always be drivers who show up at some no-name track for a purse that wouldn't pay their travel expenses to get there. **Tony Stewart** is the most successful driver who still does it. For years, he ran under a nickname, but then that nickname (**Smoke Johnson**) became so well-known there was no longer any point in using it.

➤ The Brickyard is an unusual track—it's 2.5 miles around with flat, sharp turns. There's only one track that's remotely similar, and that's the site of Sunday's race: Pocono. It's no coincidence that Stewart, who won Sunday, is good at both tracks. ➤ Keep an eye on **Jimmie Johnson** at Pocono. He finished 42nd there in June, posted his second straight DNF last week and has fallen five spots in the standings during the past two races. Where will he be when suspended crew chief **Chad Knaus** returns in three races?

➤ **INSIDE DISH**

➤ Don't try this in your car: As Stewart drove to victory Sunday, ESPN's in-car camera caught him taking a slurp of water. He pulled his water bottle out of the holder, pulled up his face shield and took a drink out of the straw. Doing so required two hands, which left none on the steering wheel. He was going in the neighborhood of 200 mph at the time.



Edwards' injured thumb is not likely to stop him from racing on the side.

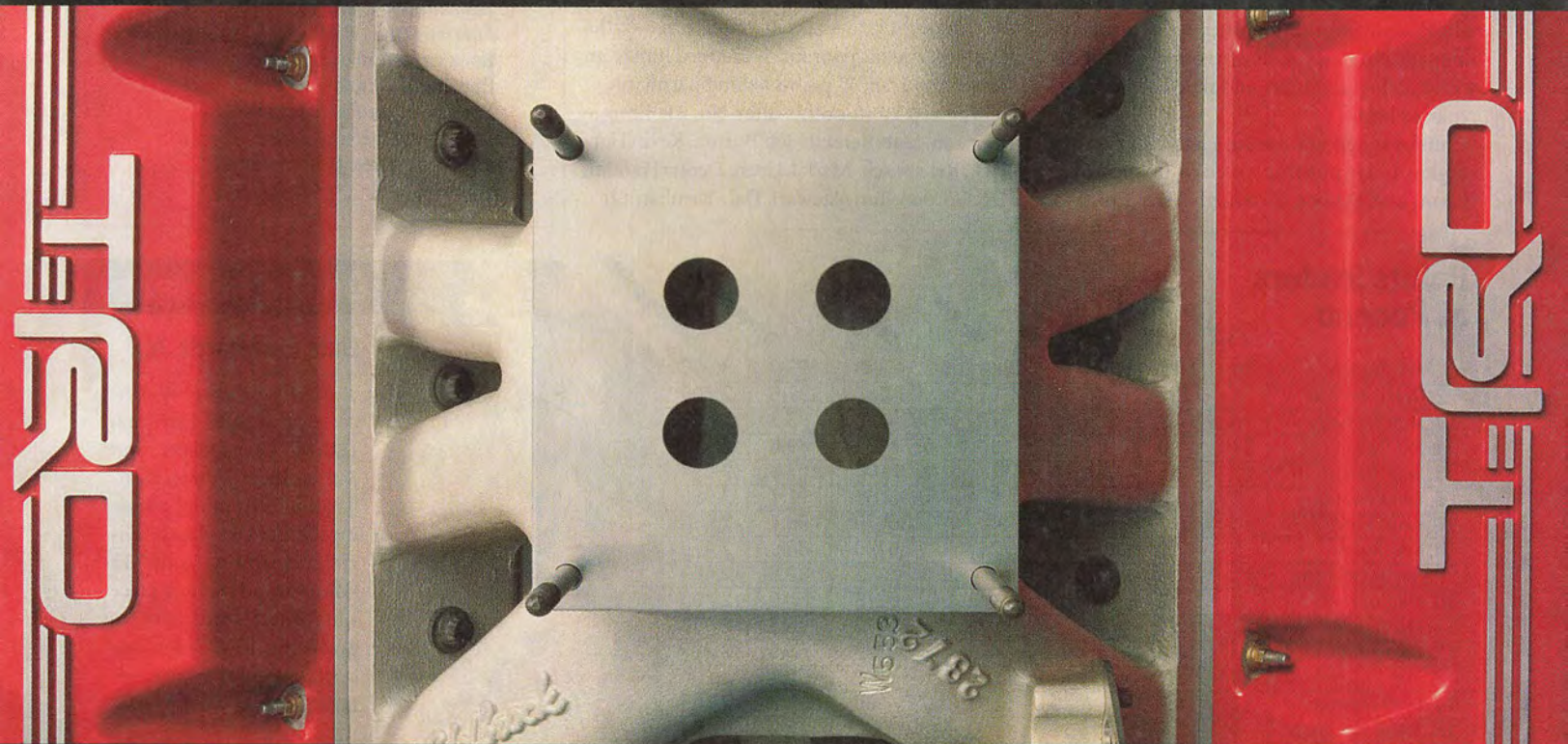


Stewart probably is gripping the wheel with both hands here.



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2007 RACE TO THE CHASE

'If you're down on power at Pocono, you're a midpack car at best.' —Tony Stewart



Three-wide *What to look for at Pocono*

- 1. Denny Hamlin.** He won both Pocono races from the pole last year and finished sixth in June.
- 2. Fuel mileage.** It's always an issue at the 2.5-mile triangle.
- 3. Temper tantrum.** Both Tony Stewart and Kurt Busch should be strong, so watch out.

Racing rewind *Last year's 21st race*

A year ago, race No. 21 was at Indianapolis, and it changed the fortunes of two drivers dramatically. Kasey Kahne fell out of the top 10 with a 36th-place finish, and Dale Earnhardt Jr. replaced him.

Junior stayed out during a late-race caution to gain track position (second behind Kyle Busch) and held on for a sixth-place finish to

move into 10th in points.

Kahne got into an accident in Turn 3 of the final lap, and his poor finish dropped him from seventh to 11th, 37 points behind Earnhardt.

The top 10 in points after No. 21: Jimmie Johnson, Matt Kenseth, Jeff Burton, Kevin Harvick, Kyle Busch, Mark Martin, Denny Hamlin, Jeff Gordon, Tony Stewart, Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Pennsylvania 500

When: 2 p.m. ET Sunday

TV: ESPN, 1 p.m. ET

Where: Pocono Raceway; Long Pond, Pa.

Track: 2.5-mile triangle

Distance: 200 laps/500 miles

Frontstretch: 3,740 feet

Backstretch: 3,055 feet

Shortstretch: 1,780 feet

Banking in Turn 1: 14 degrees

Banking in Turn 2: 8 degrees

Banking in Turn 3: 6 degrees

2006 winner: Denny Hamlin

2006 polesitter: Denny Hamlin

Website: poconoraceway.com

Points leaders at Pocono

	Races	Avg. finish	Wins	Top 5s	Top 10s	Laps/Led	Driver rating	Season points
1. Jeff Gordon	29	10.4	4	14	20	5,376/870	93.9	3,076
2. Denny Hamlin	3	2.7	2	2	3	506/283	137.5	2,705
3. Matt Kenseth	15	14.9	0	3	7	2,834/26	83.2	2,699
4. Jeff Burton	27	17.0	0	6	13	5,055/104	89.6	2,633
5. Tony Stewart	17	12.8	1	5	12	3,137/100	102.8	2,624
6. Carl Edwards	5	16.6	1	2	2	905/51	91.7	2,582
7. Kevin Harvick	13	16.3	0	1	4	2,306/0	98.4	2,488
8. Kyle Busch	5	17.0	0	1	2	857/0	88.9	2,479
9. Jimmie Johnson	11	11.2	2	3	6	2,076/275	90.8	2,469
10. Clint Bowyer	3	24.0	0	0	1	500/8	66.0	2,405
11. Martin Truex	3	12.3	0	1	2	505/1	96.3	2,335
12. Dale Earnhardt Jr.	15	18.3	0	3	4	2,753/89	68.5	2,217
13. Kurt Busch	13	15.7	1	6	6	2,323/172	109.9	2,204
14. Ryan Newman	11	14.2	1	5	5	2,035/160	99.8	2,158
15. Jamie McMurray	9	20.8	0	0	2	1,673/0	79.2	2,104



On the hot seat

Dale Earnhardt Jr.

After consecutive finishes of 36th at Daytona, 19th at Chicagoland and 34th at Indianapolis, Earnhardt is 12th in the standings—the last Chase-eligible position—only 13 points ahead of 13th-place Kurt Busch. And here's a problem: In 15 Pocono starts, Junior's average finish is 18.3.

Rudd can see clearly now—900 isn't far off

Congratulations are in order for Kyle Petty, who made his 800th Cup start last Sunday at Indianapolis. That's a lot of trips around the track. Only five other drivers have started at least 800 Cup races.

But in the Allstate 400 at the Brickyard, Petty was third fiddle to Ricky Rudd's 895th start and Terry Labonte's 850th.

Petty was 14 on March 2, 1975, when the 18-year-old Rudd finished 11th in his first Cup start, the Carolina 500 at North Carolina Motor Speedway in Rockingham. Three other drivers in that race are also in the 800 club: Richard Petty (1,185), Dave Marcis (883) and Darrell Waltrip (809).

If all goes well, Rudd's 900th start will come September 2 at California Speedway.

"To me, it's a number," Rudd says. "One day it'll be nice to look back. I'm kind of proud that we're No. 2 on the list of all-time starts, but I'm not get-

ting caught up in the actual number."

As you might imagine, Rudd, 50, has experienced a lot in his 32 seasons. He has 23 Cup wins, but he is best known for his record 788 consecutive starts, a streak that ended when he decided not to drive in 2006. Rudd won at least one race in 16 consecutive seasons (1983-98), a modern-era record he shares with Rusty Wallace.

What Rudd's young peers might not know—23 drivers in last week's Brickyard weren't even born when Rudd made his first start—is that in February 1984 he raced one of the twin 125-mile qualifying races for the Daytona 500 with his eyelids

held open by duct tape because they were still badly swollen from a wicked crash days earlier in the Busch Clash. He finished seventh and went on to finish seventh in the 500.

Or, they may not know that in September

'I'm kind of proud that we're No. 2 on the list of all-time starts, but I'm not getting caught up in the actual number.'

—Ricky Rudd



Rudd started 788 consecutive Cup races, a streak that ended when he chose not to drive in 2006.

1998 at Martinsville, Rudd became the last owner-driver to win a Cup race and was interviewed in victory lane while lying down and receiving oxygen because his back and backside were blistered from the searing heat.

—Bill Marx

ALAN MARLER FOR SN



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Let's make a (business) deal

Partnerships give teams more resources—and make it tougher on the little guys *By Reid Spencer*

One of the true old school racers in the NASCAR garage finally bit the bullet and made a deal. Now Robert Yates has help.

Lots of it.

Robert Yates Racing, meet Newman/Haas/Lanigan Racing, a seven-time Champ Car title team. The result? Yates/Newman/Haas/Lanigan Racing. Sounds more like a law firm than a race team, but the partnership moved Yates' chassis engineering capabilities from 0 to 60 in a matter of milliseconds.

The technological realities of Nextel Cup competition compelled Yates to join forces with another major player in a deal that followed closely on the heels of the merger between Dale Earnhardt Inc. and Ginn Racing. In essence, the new DEI skims the cream from Ginn—driver Mark Martin, protégé Aric Almirola and the No. 14 Chevy, which is in the top 35 in owners points—and jettisons the dead weight of two less than fully funded race teams.

The Yates and DEI deals—and the Roush Fenway partnership between Jack Roush and Red Sox owner John Henry at the start of the season—embody a trend toward consolidation of assets into strong hands. If negotiations between Evernham Motorsports and Montreal Canadiens owner George Gillett ever find their way to the dotted line, another conglomerate will be added to the list.

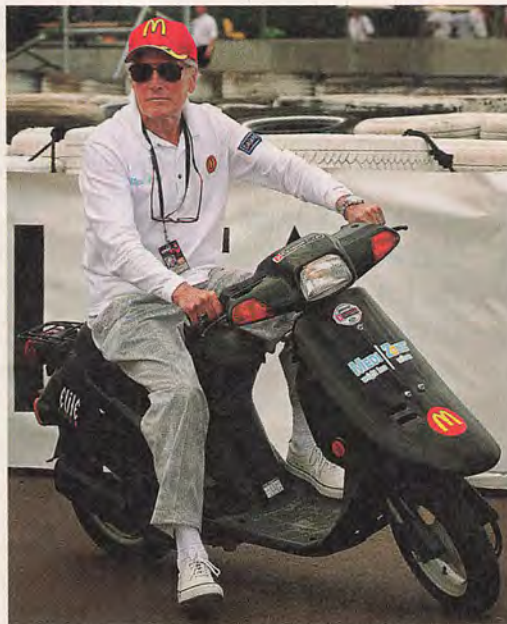
But sensible business moves also have their price. Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s immediate reaction to the closing of the deal with Ginn was concern over the streamlining that will take place within the new organization as jobs are consolidated.

"I was pretty excited to be working with Mark and anxious to hear his thoughts on the whole deal," Earnhardt said last weekend at Indianapolis. "But I was obviously interested in knowing what employees they were going to keep and who they wouldn't keep."

The DEI-Ginn merger instantly created a four-car team. Richard Childress Racing and Joe Gibbs Racing both have expressed the desire to expand from three to four teams, the maximum



Yates (above) and Paul Newman now are on the same team, a move that should boost Yates' engineering department.



money in a hurry.

Given the cost of the sport and the advantages inherent to multicar teams, is there room in Cup racing for the smaller entrepreneur? Even if there is room, is there any way for a solo operator to be competitive, as Cup champion Alan Kulwicki was a mere 15 years ago?

Ingenuity and individuality long have been watchwords of NASCAR racing, but the price of admission—in terms of money, manpower and technology—may be too steep to permit a fledgling operation to enter the sport. The ingenuity of tomorrow's stock car racing won't be found in trial-

and-error pushing of the technological envelope (because there's a much smaller and more tightly defined envelope to push) but in interpreting data from wind tunnels and seven-post shaker rigs.

As power, money and resources become concentrated in fewer, stronger hands, opportunities to break into NASCAR's premier series may diminish accordingly. The squeeze is on.

number allowed by NASCAR. Hendrick Motorsports already has four teams; Roush Fenway has five—but must pare down to four by 2010.

One reason for all the consolidation is the Car of Tomorrow, which will be the only car raced in the Cup series next year. It features a rear wing, a front splitter and tighter tolerances. The car may be less expensive to build, and teams shouldn't have to create as many track-specific cars, but the engineering needed to extract optimal performance from the COT can run into big

The squeeze is on.

SN

Pit box

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Fantasy experts Roger Kuznia and Vinnie Iyer pick Nextel Cup race winners.

Who will win at Pocono?

2 p.m. ET Sunday, ESPN

Vinnie: The only thing that stopped Denny Hamlin's two-race reign in Pennsylvania back in June was the rain. Hamlin led the most laps, but Jeff Gordon benefited from pit strategy that put him in the lead when the race was halted after 106 of 200 laps. Now Hamlin needs to solidify his No. 2 spot behind Gordon in the Nextel Cup standings. As long as the race goes the distance at Pocono, the No. 11 Chevy will get a huge win.

Roger: Hamlin did have the highest driver rating at Pocono in June, but No. 2 in that category was Ryan Newman, who finished second in the race and recorded the 10 fastest lap times in that event. Newman has hit a lull of late and he hasn't won since 2005, but that victory came at New Hampshire—another flat track. Newman has five top fives in 11 races at Pocono, and this is his time to win.

- **Sleeper:** Martin Truex.
- **Not so fast:** Carl Edwards.

- **Sleeper:** Casey Mears.
- **Not so fast:** Greg Biffle.

Nextel Cup points (based on how the experts' choices finished in points races): Roger, 2,730; Vinnie, 2,561.



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Mario Williams a bust? He's more likely to bust out.

Eleven young fellas who can stop a quick six

By Dennis Dillon

ddillon@sportingnews.com

Don't rush to judge Mario Williams, last year's No. 1 overall draft pick. Sure, it would be easy to brand him as a bust based on his rookie season. But we're putting him on our defensive all-breakout team for 2007.

Ends

Mario Williams was unable to practice for more than half of the 2006 season because of plantar fasciitis. Also, the Texans moved him around a lot; he played both right and left end and moved inside on third downs. Now that he is anchored at right end, his development should accelerate. In the offseason, Williams pushed himself during running and conditioning drills by working with the linebackers, a faster group.

Vikings coordinator Leslie Frazier, who has been around many good pass rushers as both a player and coach, thinks **Ray Edwards** can be special. Edwards lacks experience and needs to improve against the run, but he is quick off the snap, has some countermoves and can change direction without losing speed. Edwards will get a bunch of playing time—as a starter if Erasmus James hasn't recovered from a knee injury or as part of the line rotation.

Tackles

The Packers like to use a lot of linemen, so **Corey Williams** will get plenty of playing time as part of the committee. He's big, instinctive and has good speed. He showed glimpses of what he can do last season when he had three sacks in a game against Buffalo.

The Bills' **John McCargo** has a chance to be really good—he's athletic, runs pretty well and can anchor at the point of attack—but it might not happen until the second half of the season. He is still recovering from a foot injury that limited him to five games as a rookie, and the Bills won't unleash him until they feel he's ready.

Linebackers

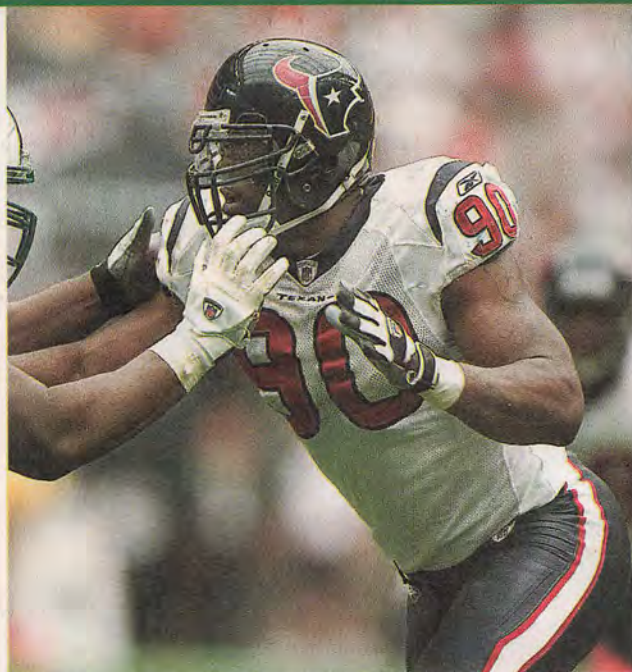
In the Tampa 2 defense, the middle linebacker needs to have sideline-to-sideline range and the speed to run down the middle of the field. That's what makes third-year player

Barrett Ruud a good fit for the Bucs. Ruud, who is taking over for Shelton Quarles, took on a leadership role during the team's minicamps and OTAs.

As a rookie last season, **D'Qwell Jackson** started 13 games at inside linebacker in the Browns' base 3-4 defense. Coordinator Todd Grantham believes that as Jackson becomes more familiar with the defense, he'll be an every-down player. Jackson is a good tackler who is instinctive, quick and tough. He was Cleveland's second-leading tackler last season even though he missed the final three games because of turf toe.

One of two new inside linebackers for San Diego, **Stephen Cooper** is inheriting Randall Godfrey's role as the guy who plugs things up and allows others to make tackles. Cooper is not as physical as Godfrey, but he is more athletic and should be able to stay on the field on third downs.

Bullocks left much room for improvement in his second season. Expect to see it.



Give Williams a set position and good health and watch him go.

Cornerbacks

Ellis Hobbs will be an integral player in the Patriots' secondary, especially if Asante Samuel makes good on his threat to sit out the first 10 games of the season. Although Hobbs (5-9) gives away a few inches and will sometimes misread a play and get beat deep, you have to admire his confidence. He's eager to test himself against the AFC's top receivers.

Although **Johnathan Joseph** arrived as a raw rookie last year—he played in only 14 games at South Carolina before coming out early—the Bengals were impressed enough with his natural skills to draft him in the first round. Joseph has all the qualities coaches look for in a cornerback, but he needs to relax and concentrate



speedread


Commissioner Roger Goodell's denial of Pacman Jones' request to participate in training camp had to have been embraced heartily by the Titans. Besides being a major distraction, the suspended Jones would have taken reps away from other players. Jones clearly is in the Titans' rearview mirror—and his image gets smaller by the day.

more when he gets his hands on the ball. He dropped about 10 potential interceptions last season.

Safeties

The Saints were surprised how quickly **Roman Harper** picked things up as a rookie last year before a knee injury ended his season after five games. Harper does no one thing extraordinarily well, but he has the all-around package coaches look for in a safety. He participated in all the offseason activities without restriction and will try to reclaim his starting job in training camp.

As a rookie last season, the Lions' **Daniel Bullocks** often looked hesitant, took poor angles and didn't hit with explosiveness. Coach Rod Marinelli liked what he saw of Bullocks during the offseason, but he wants to see him catch more balls. Even though he started seven games in 2006, Bullocks had no interceptions and broke up only five passes. **SN**

 For team previews that go deeper than you ever dreamed possible, get your copy of *Sporting News' 2007 Pro Football yearbook* on newsstands or at sportingnews.com/books.

The Cardinals will do more than just throw the ball to WR **Anquan Boldin** this season. He'll also be a runner out of the backfield and will even throw a few passes.

Boldin played some quarterback at Florida State and has a strong arm. He grips the ball in an unusual way—on the smooth side, away from the laces. > Cowboys QB **Tony Romo**

would like a new contract before the end of camp, but he's more likely to get one in the middle of the season, when owner **Jerry Jones** will have a much better idea of where Romo ranks among NFL quarterbacks. > The Broncos have pursued S **Greg Wesley** for most of the offseason, but the Chiefs have opted not to make him available—yet. Kansas City appears hesitant to deal with a division rival and wants to gauge the camp progress of second-year player **Bernard**

INSIDE DISH



Word out of Cards camp is that Boldin can sling it, too.

use more depth, and Broncos S **Sam Brandon** (knee) likely is out for the season. > Bucs QB **Chris Simms** has developed bad mechanical habits as a result of favoring the area where his

spleen was removed last season. If Simms struggles early in camp, he could lose reps and fall far behind **Jeff Garcia** and **Bruce Gradkowski** in the battle for the starting job. > Look for the Eagles to showcase QB **Kelly Holcomb** in the preseason in hopes of trading him to recoup a draft pick. The Vikings are rumored to be interested, and the teams have made trades in the past. The Falcons and other clubs also could get involved.

—SN correspondents

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Fantasy Source

Inevitably, there comes a moment in every draft when that next selection will decide the fate of your season.

These guys will make you —if they don't break you

By George Winkler

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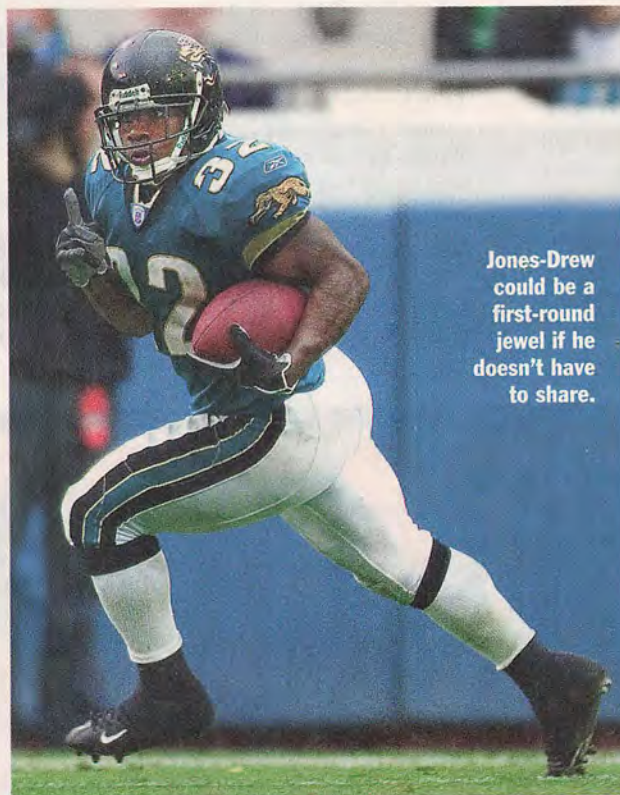
Fantasy owners have a sense of when they have just drafted the player who could make or break their season. But after an initial feeling of exhilaration, the reality sets in that the pick had better work out or you'll be listening to Timmy Told You So for 17 weeks.

How these critical picks turn out often determines whether you take a play-it-safe approach or more calculated risks the next season. But as an owner who smartly reached for Frank Gore in one league last year but took the sickening plunge for Randy Moss in another, I can tell you there's no easy answer to which strategy is better.

With that in mind, I'm prepared to offer my thoughts on potential must-or-bust picks for each of the first four rounds of this year's draft.

Round 1: Maurice Jones-Drew, RB, Jaguars.

Jones-Drew, one of the best waiver pickups last season, scored 16 touchdowns despite sharing carries with Fred Taylor. But I was shocked to see Jones-Drew go this high in several pre-season mock drafts. Yes, he appears ready to



Jones-Drew could be a first-round jewel if he doesn't have to share.

take over a lead role, but the Jaguars apparently aren't ready to give up on Taylor just yet. Until they do, Jones-Drew will have trouble living up to this lofty position.

Round 2: Cedric Benson, RB, Bears. Fantasy owners don't know what to make of Benson. He's stepping into a prime role with the departure of Thomas Jones to the Jets, but Benson has durability and attitude issues. If I'm picking late in the second round and I have a choice between Benson and Jones, Benson is second

fiddle. He must prove he can last an entire season before I invest this heavily in him.

Round 3: Randy Moss, WR, Patriots. I guess I never learn, but I see tons of upside in Moss. Sure, I've heard the spiel about how the Patriots like to spread the ball around. But that could be because they've never had a wideout with Moss' talent. I figure he'll behave for at least one season under Bill Belichick; his motivation will be high because his team will be winning.

Round 4: Cadillac Williams, RB, Bucs. Williams epitomized *sophomore slump* last year, but there's reason for optimism. Jeff Garcia will pep up the Bucs' offense and give Williams more chances to score points as a receiver. Plus, Williams will benefit from a schedule that includes soft run defenses in the NFC West and AFC South. **SN**

COUNTERPOINTS

Will this be a bounce-back year for Giants DE Osi Umenyiora?

NO Umenyiora's value will be limited for several reasons. First, with Tiki Barber retired, the offense likely won't hand the defense as many big leads. So opponents won't throw as much and Giants linemen won't get as many sack opportunities. Second, although I'm not worried about the hip injury that slowed Umenyiora last season, I am concerned about Michael Strahan's status. If Strahan isn't on the other side, Umenyiora will draw even more attention from blockers. He'll be decent but not an elite fantasy option. —Rob Hurtt



YES I'm plenty high on Umenyiora for several reasons. Most important, he's only 25 and is a very hard worker. Plus, Strahan can't be worse than he was last season if he decides not to retire. New coordinator Steve Spagnuolo brings an aggressive mindset from Philadelphia, where he worked as linebackers coach. That should mean more big plays for Umenyiora. Also, the Giants are healthier overall. There won't be any excuse for him to not flourish during this defense's transitional period. —Roger Kuznia



A healthy McNabb will make the Eagles' offense even tougher to defend.

Soar with the Eagles—or check out any other team

SportingNews.com is analyzing the fantasy prowess of all 32 NFL teams. An excerpt from Vinnie Iyer's Eagles preview:

Donovan McNabb's knee injury might cause owners to shy away from him, but his rehab is on track and, with his supporting cast, there's no reason to think he can't pick up where he left off.

Without McNabb last season, the team leaned a lot more on the running of Brian Westbrook, who responded with his best all-around season. Plus, the defense seemed more responsive when the team was tilted toward the run.

The Eagles proved they are versatile, and that makes them a daunting offense to defend. Don't expect much drop-off from their second-place finish in total yards and sixth-place finish in scoring. On defense, they should be stronger at the point of attack with their front seven.

For the full Eagles preview and previews on every team, go to: fantasysource.sportingnews.com/nfl.

RANKINGS

Running backs

- 1 **LaDainian Tomlinson**
Chargers
- 2 **Larry Johnson**
Chiefs
- 3 **Steven Jackson**
Rams
- 4 **Frank Gore**
49ers
- 5 **Shaun Alexander**
Seahawks
- 6 **Brian Westbrook**
Eagles
- 7 **Joseph Addai**
Colts
- 8 **Rudi Johnson**
Bengals
- 9 **Willie Parker**
Steelers
- 10 **Reggie Bush**
Saints
- 11 **Ronnie Brown**
Dolphins
- 12 **Clinton Portis**
Redskins
- 13 **Edgerrin James**
Cardinals
- 14 **Willis McGahee**
Ravens
- 15 **Maurice Jones-Drew**
Jaguars
- 16 **Laurence Maroney**
Patriots
- 17 **Travis Henry**
Broncos
- 18 **Thomas Jones**
Jets
- 19 **Cedric Benson**
Bears
- 20 **Brandon Jacobs**
Giants
- 21 **Deuce McAllister**
Saints
- 22 **Marion Barber**
Cowboys
- 23 **Cadillac Williams**
Bucs
- 24 **Jerious Norwood**
Falcons
- 25 **Ahman Green**
Texans

L.J.'s stock is slipping, but he's still No. 2 with us

The buzz—or buzz kill, perhaps—is already building around Chiefs running back Larry Johnson. L.J. is slipping in the rankings because of his heavy workload last season and the threat of a contract holdout this summer.

But you know worries about Johnson have gone overboard when you see a publication rank him sixth overall behind such backs as Willie Parker and Joseph Addai. That's no way to treat the guy who ranked

second to LaDainian Tomlinson last season in rushing yards and rushing touchdowns.

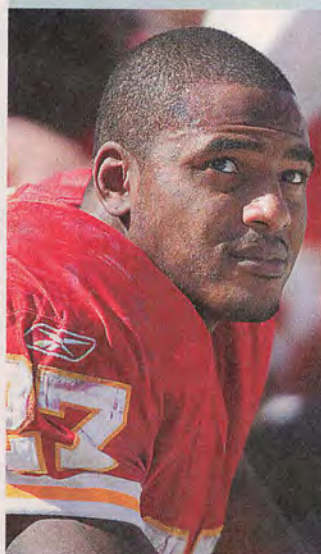
I admit I've been tempted to put Steven Jackson and/or Frank Gore ahead of L.J., but a glance at our most recent running back rankings shows we're not ready to abandon L.J. as the second-best choice just yet.

Last time I checked, he was still the Chiefs' best option on offense. Coach Herm Edwards will discover

Don't worry about L.J. He's still the engine that pulls the Chiefs' offense.

that he needs to ride Johnson as much as he did last season, thanks to an unsettled quarterback situation and a questionable receiving corps. No, Priest Holmes won't save the day.

Sure, L.J. carried the ball too often last year (an NFL-record 416 times), but he showed no signs of wearing down. And, he's still just 27. He has taken his share of hits, but he doesn't deserve to be slammed in the rankings. —G.W.



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AFC

FOCUS ON QUA

1 COLTS Peyton Manning has no peers when it comes to reading defenses and making presnap adjustments. Backup Jim Sorgi has played sparingly but effectively.

2 PATRIOTS Tom Brady's ability in the clutch is unparalleled, and he loves to use third and fourth options to pick apart defenses. Backup Matt Cassel is untested.

3 BENGALS The combination of arm strength, accuracy and leadership makes Carson Palmer an elite quarterback. Doug Johnson is a solid backup because he has experience in a pass-oriented system.

4 CHARGERS Philip Rivers makes very few mistakes, and his growth under coach Norv Turner should be substantial. Charlie Whitehurst will push Billy Volek for the backup spot.

5 TITANS With a year under his belt, Vince Young will be able to read coverages better and resort to improvisation less frequently. Kerry Collins is a capable No. 2.

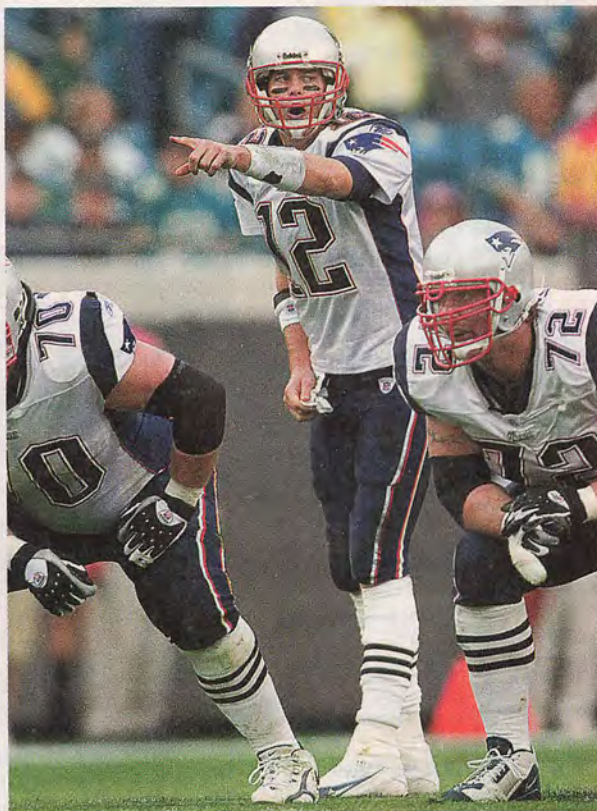
6 STEELERS Ben Roethlisberger must bounce back from a season beset with injuries, interceptions (23) and sacks (46). Charlie Batch is a solid backup and a good fit.

7 RAVENS Steve McNair, 34, has lost arm strength but is still accurate on short and midrange passes. Backup Kyle Boller has experience with the offense.

8 BRONCOS Smart and strong-armed, Jay Cutler could have a breakout season. Patrick Ramsey has a similar skill set that allows the team to retain its game plan in case of injury.

9 JETS A thinking man's quarterback, Chad Pennington is efficient and accurate. Backups Kellen Clemens, Marques Tuiasosopo and Brad Smith are unproven.

10 JAGUARS The club needs oft-injured Byron Leftwich to avoid punishment. Backup David Garrard tucks the ball and runs too often.



You would think three Super Bowl victories would put Brady at the top of any list, but you would be wrong.



TOP 5

1. Peyton Manning, Colts. Now that he has his Super Bowl ring, he can start building his portfolio as the best quarterback ever.

2. Tom Brady, Patriots. New England's increase in receiving talent comes with a price: Brady must keep Randy Moss happy. If anybody can do it, he can.

3. Carson Palmer, Bengals. He is overaggressive at times, but when you have the big arm and special receivers, you go for it.

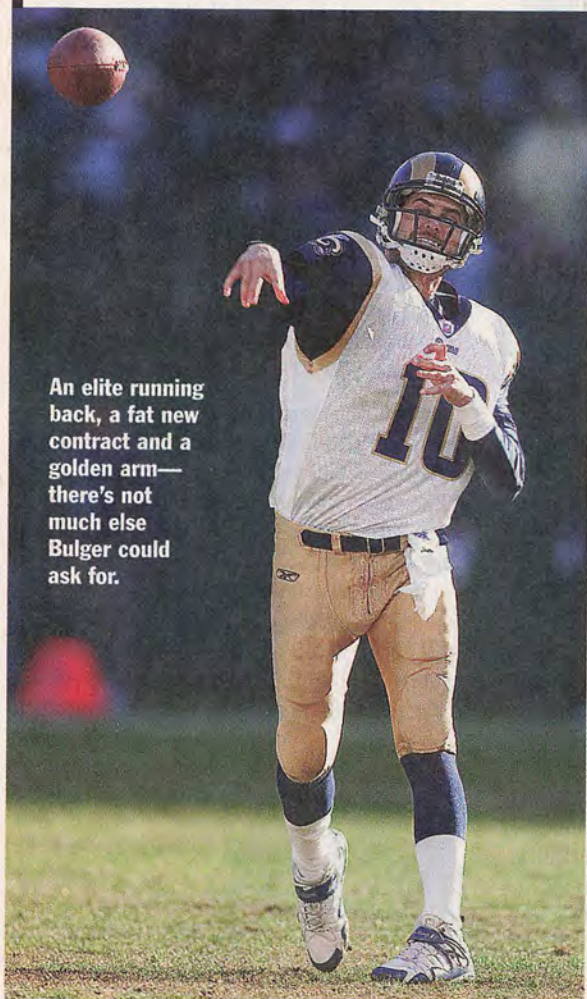
4. Philip Rivers, Chargers. His pocket awareness is excellent for a young player, but he needs to ramp up his decision making and accuracy.

5. Vince Young, Titans. As a rookie, he willed a sorry team to eight wins in 13 starts. Though he'll have even less talent to work with in '07, his electric set of skills will keep opponents hopping.

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QUARTERBACKS

NFC



An elite running back, a fat new contract and a golden arm—there's not much else Bulger could ask for.

1 RAMS Marc Bulger has established himself as one of the league's elite and is extremely accurate. Gus Frerotte is a capable short-term replacement.

2 EAGLES Donovan McNabb is the NFC's most talented quarterback but not its most durable one. A.J. Feeley is a solid backup in Andy Reid's system.

3 SAINTS Drew Brees brings confidence, leadership and accountability to the locker room and huddle. Backup Jamie Martin has earned the trust of Sean Payton.

4 COWBOYS Tony Romo has great promise but needs to be more consistent. Brad Johnson is a fine backup because he won't lose a game by himself.

5 SEAHAWKS The top priority is keeping Matt Hasselbeck healthy after an injury-plagued '06. Seneca Wallace filled in capably last season but has some limitations.

6 CARDINALS Matt Leinart showed last year he has the skills, smarts and charisma to be a star. Kurt Warner is the perfect backup and mentor.

7 PACKERS Brett Favre provides outstanding leadership but can't carry a team like he used to. Aaron Rodgers will be under pressure this preseason to show he can play.

8 PANTHERS Jake Delhomme is coming off a rocky season, but there's no reason he can't regain his form. David Carr provides insurance and could benefit from a fresh start.

9 LIONS Jon Kitna is a gritty leader but must play better in the fourth quarter. Backups Dan Orlovsky and Drew Stanton are inexperienced.

10 GIANTS Eli Manning has the arm, smarts and work ethic, but his throwing mechanics and footwork sometimes betray

him. Anthony Wright is expected to win the backup job.

11 49ERS Alex Smith is far from polished but has good arm strength, and his decision making has improved. Trent Dilfer is a seasoned backup and a good mentor.

12 BUCCANEERS If Jeff Garcia were a little younger and Chris Simms a little more seasoned, this would be an area of strength. Instead, the group is just average.

13 BEARS Rex Grossman is entering a make-or-break season and needs to

perform better under pressure. If he falters, Brian Griese is a dependable backup.

14 REDSKINS Jason Campbell is big and mobile, has a strong arm and provides quiet leadership. Mark Brunell should perform well if needed in a pinch.

15 FALCONS Without Michael Vick, the team turns to the much-maligned Joey Harrington, who will need help from his supporting cast. D.J. Shockley and Chris Redman, who hasn't played since 2003, are the backups.

16 VIKINGS Together, Tarvaris Jackson and Brooks Bollinger have 11 career starts. Neither should be forced to carry too much of the load.



TOP 5

1. Drew Brees, Saints. In his first year in New Orleans, he settled in as a special leader and a master of Sean Payton's offense. He is lights-out accurate.

2. Donovan McNabb, Eagles. The guy is an unquestioned force, but he has missed six or more games in three of the past five years.

3. Marc Bulger, Rams. His body held up last season, and his touch and decision making were better than ever. He needs to be more proficient in the red zone.

4. Matt Hasselbeck, Seahawks. He slumped last season when he had injury problems and tried to do too much. He's too good to fizzle again.

5. Tony Romo, Cowboys. He's no one-hit wonder. Romo has the athletic ability and touch to stay on the ascent, but he must do a better job of protecting the ball.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Pat Yasinskas; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Mark Eckel; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.



The Texans don't need McCardell to be a star, just a consistent contributor.

The **JETS** have depth issues at wide receiver. **Tim Dwight** (foot) opened camp on the physically unable to perform list, and **Brad Smith** has been switched to quarterback, his college position. Rookie **Chansi Stuckey**, a seventh-round pick, now could be a factor in the slot. ... The **BILLS** are looking to open up their offense by using their running backs and tight ends more in the passing game. The team hasn't gotten much production out of those positions in recent years because mediocre offensive line play forced the coaches to use a back or tight end as an extra pass protector. ... **BRONCOS** rookie DE **Jarvis Moss** (6-6, 251) will have to bulk up to become an every-down player, but he still should get on the field right away. In minicamps, Moss showed a quick burst that will be valuable on passing downs. ... The signing of WR **Eric Moulds** is more about consistency and leadership for the **TITANS'** young receivers than big-play potential. Moulds was somewhat productive last season in Houston but seldom got downfield. The Titans want a dependable target for QB **Vince Young**. ... The **RAIDERS'** makeover continued when first-year coach **Lane Kiffin** released LS **Adam Treu**, Ss **Jarrold Cooper** and **Darnell Bing** and TE **Courtney Anderson**. All except Bing had played key roles over the past three seasons. Anderson, a former starter, will

be replaced by rookie **Zach Miller**. ... The **PATRIOTS** will stage an interesting battle at right tackle. Incumbent **Nick Kaczur** (6-3, 315) has the mobility and toughness the team normally values, but second-year pro **Ryan O'Callaghan** offers more size (6-7, 330) and raw power. O'Callaghan's limited mobility is offset by his ability to anchor against bull rushers. ... The **RAVENS** envision speedy rookie WR **Yamon Figurs** as a vertical threat. He has the ability to run good routes and make tough catches. Now he needs time to learn the offense. ... The **TEXANS** signed WR **Keenan McCardell** to provide a veteran presence for an inexperienced receiving unit. McCardell could step in as the No. 2 receiver. Rookie **Jacoby Jones**, who has the ability to spread defenses, could emerge as the No. 3. ... OLB **Lawrence Timmons**, the **STEELERS'** first-round pick, tweaked a groin injury that forced him to sit out the entire off-season program and could nag him during camp. Timmons is falling behind fellow rookie OLB **LaMarr Woodley**, who has impressed coaches and could earn immediate playing time. ... New **BROWNS** NT **Shaun Smith**, who would have struggled to make the rotation in Cincinnati's 4-3 defense, is expected to share playing time with **Ted Washington** and may eventually become the starter in the Browns' 3-4. Smith has size, confidence and experience—and he's a vocal leader. ... **CHARGERS** CB **Paul Oliver**, who was taken in the supplemental draft, was impressive in the rookies-only workouts that opened camp. He's a little heavy but still quick. And coaches like the poise he has shown, even though he got an extremely late start. ... Not only has free-agent pickup **Dennis Northcutt** been penciled in as the **JAGUARS'** slot receiver, but he has taken on the role

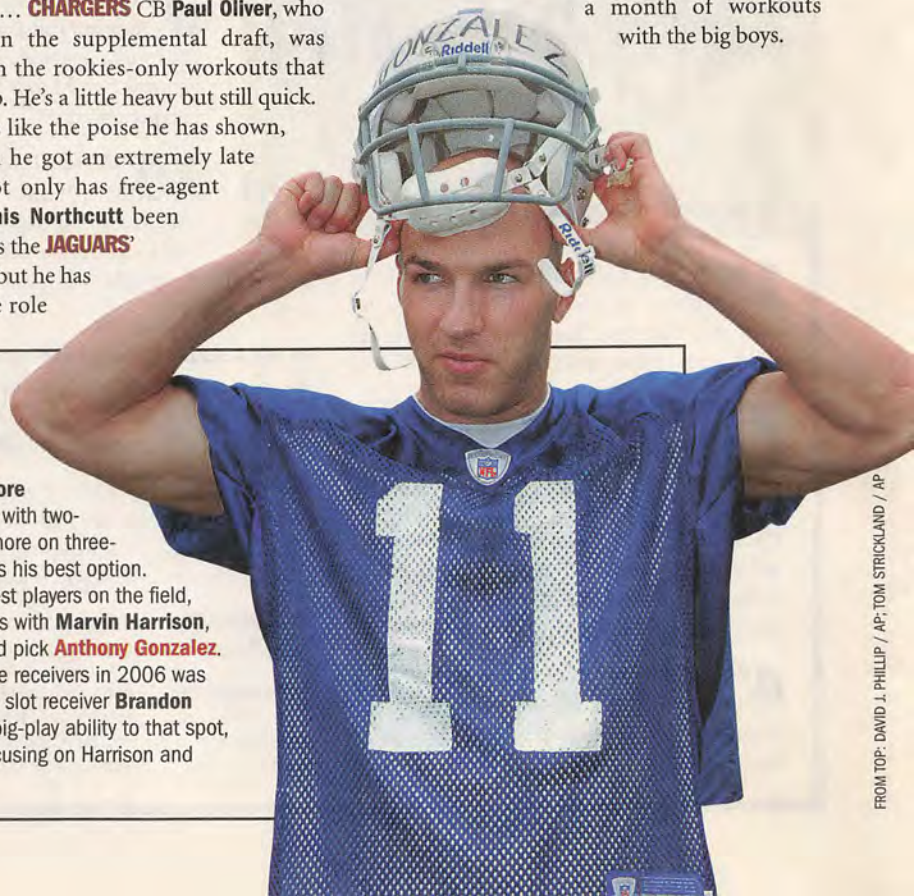
He's back ... but what can he do for an encore?

The Chiefs will use camp practices to determine the strengths and weaknesses of RB **Priest Holmes**, who is returning to the team after being sidelined with head and neck injuries since 2005. Expectations need to be controlled. Holmes has not played or practiced in almost two years, and he will turn 34 in October. He also is a questionable fit in a system that favors the power running game over the open-field approach the Chiefs used when Holmes was their starter. Even if Holmes makes the team, it's hard to believe he will be anything more than a change-of-pace backup for **Larry Johnson** or part of a rotation if Johnson holds out.

of mentor. Northcutt is teaching younger receivers the finer points of route running, reading defenses and game preparation. ... When **Odell Thurman's** petition for reinstatement was denied, second-year **BENGALS** MLB **Ahmad Brooks** solidified his hold on a starting job. Thurman sat out the 2006 season for violating the NFL's substance abuse policy. ... All eyes in **DOLPHINS** camp will be on rookie C **Samson Satele**, a potential starter. He has impressed coaches with his intelligence, strength and leverage. Now he must endure a month of workouts with the big boys.

Catching up with the Colts

Colts coordinator **Tom Moore** must decide whether to stick with two-tight end formations or rely more on three-receiver sets. The latter seems his best option. Moore stresses getting his best players on the field, and a best-receivers list starts with **Marvin Harrison**, **Reggie Wayne** and first-round pick **Anthony Gonzalez**. The team's ability to use three receivers in 2006 was limited because of injuries to slot receiver **Brandon Stokley**. Gonzalez will bring big-play ability to that spot, particularly with defenses focusing on Harrison and Wayne on the outside.





INSIDE THE NFC

49ERS rookie RB **Thomas Clayton** has shown speed and elusiveness in practice and could put up a fight for the No. 2 job behind **Frank Gore**. Clayton clashed with some of his coaches at Kansas State but hasn't caused any problems since joining the 49ers. ... Free-agent pickup **Frank Walker** has the inside track on the

Falling weight, rising stock

Lions RG **Damien Woody**, who has lost 48 pounds and restructured his contract, is a starter again—for now. Woody, who is down to 330 pounds and hopes to lose a little more, appears focused on returning to the Pro Bowl level he established when he was with the Patriots from 1999 to 2003. The Lions will get a boost if Woody keeps his intensity up, but if his commitment wavers the team won't hesitate to turn to **Stephen Peterman**.



PACKERS' nickel back job. He's a bulldog at the line of scrimmage, which fits the defense's aggressive philosophy. ... The **EAGLES** will bring TE **L.J. Smith** along slowly as he recovers from offseason sports hernia surgery. That means **Matt Schobel** will get plenty of first-team reps, but Schobel must catch the ball better than he did in camp last season or rookie **Brent Celek** could nudge ahead of him. ... The season-ending injury to S **Steve Gleason** (knee) is a blow to the **SAINTS'** special teams, on which he displayed a fiery attitude and relentless effort. His blocked punt helped spark the team to a Week 3 win over the Falcons last season. ... **Gabe Watson** and **Alan Branch** are competing for the **CARDINALS'** starting nose tackle job, but ideally they will split time. Both are in the 330-pound range, and an equal rotation system would keep them fresh. The team needs to get a push in the middle of its 3-4 alignment. ... The **REDSKINS** have tweaked their passing game to take advantage of QB **Jason Campbell's** ability to throw deep. But the line must show it can give the receivers enough time to get downfield, and those receivers—especially **Brandon Lloyd**—need to get off the line faster and provide more explosive plays. ... The **VIKINGS** are hoping WR **Bobby Wade** will provide the midrange receiving skills they lacked last season. He will work mostly out of the slot and will be a tough matchup for nickel backs or linebackers. ... The release of DE **Simeon Rice**, who still is recovering from shoulder surgery, weakens the **BUCS** dramatically. Rookie **Gainse Adams** likely will start. He has the speed and quickness to make an impact but is raw. ... The **BEARS'** defense was bolstered in a big way when OLB **Lance Briggs** agreed to a one-year contract after it

For the Redskins' vertical passing game to work, Lloyd must be able to get deep.

appeared he would hold out. The team figures to have a hard time keeping Briggs beyond this season, but at least it now has time to groom **Jamar Williams**. ... **RAMS** LT **Orlando Pace** reported to camp at 321 pounds, which is 10 to 15 pounds lighter than in most seasons. Pace believes carrying fewer pounds will help his quickness and result in less stress on his knees and leg muscles. ... **GIANTS** quarterbacks coach **Chris Palmer** is trying to get **Eli Manning** to be more accurate when moving to the left, which is a difficult throw for a righthander. Palmer wants Manning's hips to be turned and for him to position his left shoulder under his chin. ... Look for more presnap motion from the **SEA-HAWKS'** offense. Coach **Mike Holmgren** wants to better disguise what the team plans to do from certain sets and with different personnel groupings. ... **PANTHERS** QB **David Carr** clearly entered camp as **Jake Delhomme's** backup, so there's no need to rush Carr. He has good physical skills, but the coaches believe he needs to get his confidence back after taking a pounding with the Texans. Once Carr gets comfortable, he could push Delhomme. ... **COWBOYS** OLB **Greg Ellis** felt pain in his left Achilles', which he ruptured last season, in his first camp practice. He was participating in a drill in which he was taking on blockers, the first real football movements he has done since his rehab began. The team will take it slowly with Ellis but expects him to be ready for the regular season.

Falcons turn to (another) Plan B

Warrick Dunn (back surgery) isn't expected to be at full strength at the start of the regular season, which means **Jerious Norwood** will take over the Falcons' top running back spot.

Norwood rushed for 633

yards—and averaged a whopping 6.4 yards—as a rookie last season. He has blazing speed and above-average cutting ability. Norwood, however, got dinged up a lot and must be more decisive in making cuts. With QB **Michael Vick** out indefinitely, the team will need a strong running game to have any success.



Forget the numbers. Records could never capture or define Wake Forest's gregarious coach.

Prosser's love for people was more than just talk

By Mike DeCourcy

decourcy@sportingnews.com

Watching ESPN Classic last Thursday through the haze generated by Skip Prosser's passing, I noticed the news scroll at the bottom of the screen sending along another reminder that none of us would see him alive again.

With a replay of Wake Forest's 2004-05 victory over Duke playing on the screen above, the words below mentioned Skip's death followed by his career coaching record.

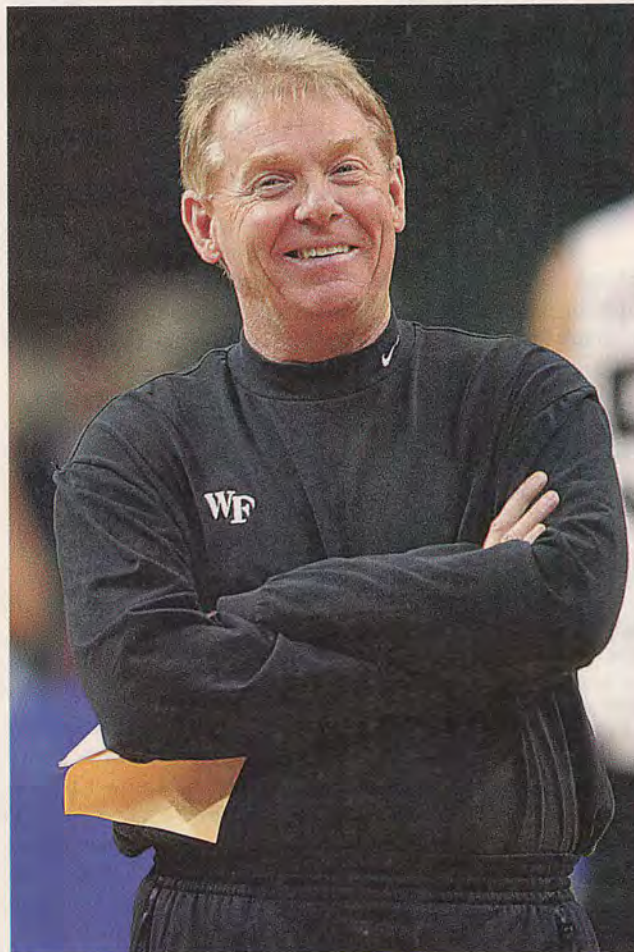
That struck me as odd. Skip always said he did not have a career record, that the players won and lost games. This was a reasonable perspective, but more pertinent perhaps is the notion that his record really did not matter. If ever there were a coach the numbers and results could not capture or define, it was Skip Prosser.

He was a words guy. He valued education and insisted his players take advantage of opportunities presented by their scholarships. He cited quotations—from Churchill, Shakespeare, Plato—to help them through challenging times. He loved the language. He loved to read. He loved to talk, not because he loved the sound of his voice but because it connected him to other people—and he loved people most of all.

There isn't a college coach who wouldn't be missed by someone. There are a precious few who would be missed by everyone.

I was lucky to spend one final morning with Skip last week at the Reebok Summer Championships in Las Vegas. I had wanted to discuss Wake Forest's great recruiting class of Al-Farouq Aminu, Ty Walker and Tony Woods—three top 50 players who committed there despite the Deacons' consecutive subpar seasons—and Skip happened to walk into the gym. We did talk about that, but when we were finished, we talked about so much more.

Skip never lost the appreciation for how profoundly



The smile, like his concern for players, was a Prosser trademark.

he had been blessed. He always was amazed he could go from being an above-average athlete at Carnegie High in western Pennsylvania to coaching high school ball in West Virginia and eventually running a program in the nation's most prestigious college basketball league.

He had been head coach at Xavier seven years when Wake Forest asked him to coach in the ACC. The ACC? That was impossible to decline, and it proved

impossible to abandon, too. Skip had two chances to return "home"—to Pittsburgh in 2003 when Ben Howland left Pitt and to Cincinnati in 2006, a year after Bob Huggins was dismissed by the Bearcats. But both times he said no, pleased to continue coaching at Wake Forest. He loved Wake because it was, like previous coaching stops Xavier and Loyola (Md.), a place that valued the education presented to its athletes.

As we sat in those plastic chairs last week, inches from the court in the Green Valley High auxiliary gym, he told me the most remarkable story. We were discussing how tough fans could be on coaches, and I mentioned the value of a school committing to a coach the way Xavier had stood by Sean Miller this spring, extending his contract through the 2015-2016 season.

Skip recalled his early seasons at Xavier. His first year was great, with plenty of left-over talent he had helped Pete Gillen recruit. In Year 2, however, he had to rebuild the team around freshmen Lenny Brown, Gary Lumpkin and Darnell Williams while it made the climb from the old Midwestern Collegiate Conference to an Atlantic 10 featuring the John Calipari-Marcus Camby Massachusetts powerhouse teams.

The Xavier freshmen displayed promise but finished 13-15. Not long after the season, Skip got a call from the president's office to arrange a dinner at which his contract would be discussed. That sounded ominous, so

Skip prepared by listing the reasons for the disappointing season on an index card and placing it in his breast pocket.

When the waiter cleared the dishes and asked if anybody wanted coffee, Skip excused himself to the restroom "even though I didn't have to go." He read over his notes to assure he wouldn't forget any salient points. Skip took a breath and returned to the table.

"They said, 'We don't ever want you to leave,'" Skip said. The possibility of a 10-year extension was mentioned. He was relieved.

Another 10 years with Skip Prosser. Who wouldn't take that deal now?

SN

There isn't a college coach who wouldn't be missed by someone. There are a precious few who would be missed by everyone.

The dismal performance by the United States at the Pan American Games offers more evidence that USA Basketball needs to abandon its traditional tryout process for youth-level teams and be more judicious about choosing players who fit the international game. The pickup-style tryouts waste precious practice time and fail to identify the type of players who will succeed.

Though he can be inconsistent, center J'Mison Morgan (Dallas) should be climbing the class of 2008 recruiting charts after his play in the Reebok Summer Championships at Las Vegas. Morgan currently is ranked around 40th in his class, but his size (6-10, 275) and athleticism will vault him higher than that.

It was smart for Washington State to more than double coach Tony Bennett's salary. Finding a replacement who could deliver a 26-win season to WSU wouldn't be easy. But it wasn't so smart to set his buyout at \$500,000. No big-time program eager to hire Bennett would flinch at covering that.

BLOG ALERT

'Worrying about Roy Williams' recruiting efforts because he misses on a prospect or two is like giving up on Tiger Woods because he hits his opening drive into a fairway bunker.'

Mike DeCourcy doesn't have the Carolina blues. Check out his true colors at sportingnews.com.

Memphis coach **John Calipari** is taking the unusual step of building out his schedule three seasons into the future, similar to what football programs do. To keep Memphis playing high-profile opponents while a member of low-profile Conference USA, he is lining up games with Ohio State, Syracuse, Texas and West Virginia in addition to already established series with Georgetown and Tennessee. ➤ Marquette will travel to Vancouver over the Labor Day holiday and already has used a few of its 10 allotted practices to prepare for the four games in Canada. The sessions allow coach **Tom Crean** to experiment with a four-guard lineup that will require junior G/F **Wesley Matthews** to deal with opposing power forwards and join a rotation that includes **Jerel McNeal**, **Dominic James**, **David Cubillan** and **Maurice Acker**. Trouble is, Cubillan might not make the trip. He made the Venezuelan national team, and if that squad reaches the semifinals of the Americas Olympic qualifying tournament, Cubillan will be occupied. ➤ Northern Iowa is working on a triangle offense as it prepares to represent the United States in the World University Games. The triangle, which is not a point guard-dependent attack, will be an adjustment to playing without four-year PG **Brooks McKowen**, who will be employed by the Panthers as a graduate manager this year. Ironically, McKowen is eligible to play in the World Games and probably will be included on the team's 12-man roster. ➤ Duke SG **DeMarcus Nelson** is able to run and work on his shooting form as he recovers from a broken wrist suffered at the U.S. trials for the Pan American Games. The break was minor, but surgery was performed to insert a screw that promotes blood flow and faster healing. ➤ The folks at Mississippi State were surprised SG **Jamont Gordon** didn't get a chance to try out for the Pan Am team. Gordon averaged 16.0 points and 5.3 assists as a sophomore. Instead of competing for a spot with the U.S. team, Gordon has



Offseason wrist surgery shouldn't keep Nelson (21) from terrorizing ACC opponents this season.

INSIDE DISH



been working to improve his midrange game in Starkville. That could be valuable for a guard with his size (6-4, 225). ➤ One reason for N.C. State PF **Brandon Costner's** struggles at the Pan Am tryouts: tendinitis in his knee. He is expected to be fine by the time classes begin. ➤ With three commitments already in place, two-time defending champion Florida is hitting the recruiting trail looking for two big men. Ideally, one will provide a physical inside presence and the other will have scoring ability. The Gators are included on a long list of schools competing for top PFs **Greg Monroe** (Harvey, La.) and **Angel Garcia** (East Chicago, Ind.). They also scouted Miami PF **Eloy Vargas** in the Reebok Summer Championships. ➤ Though he'll begin his career at Mississippi in the fall, PF **Malcolm White** played in the Main Event tournament in Las Vegas and drew a comparison to former Cincinnati PF **Kenyon Martin** from veteran scout **Van Coleman** of Hoopmasters.com. The similarity apparently is in White's ability to leap high and quickly. Expect Rebels coach **Andy Kennedy** to ask pal **Bob Huggins**, who coached Martin, for tips on bringing out White's best.



EXP•SURE

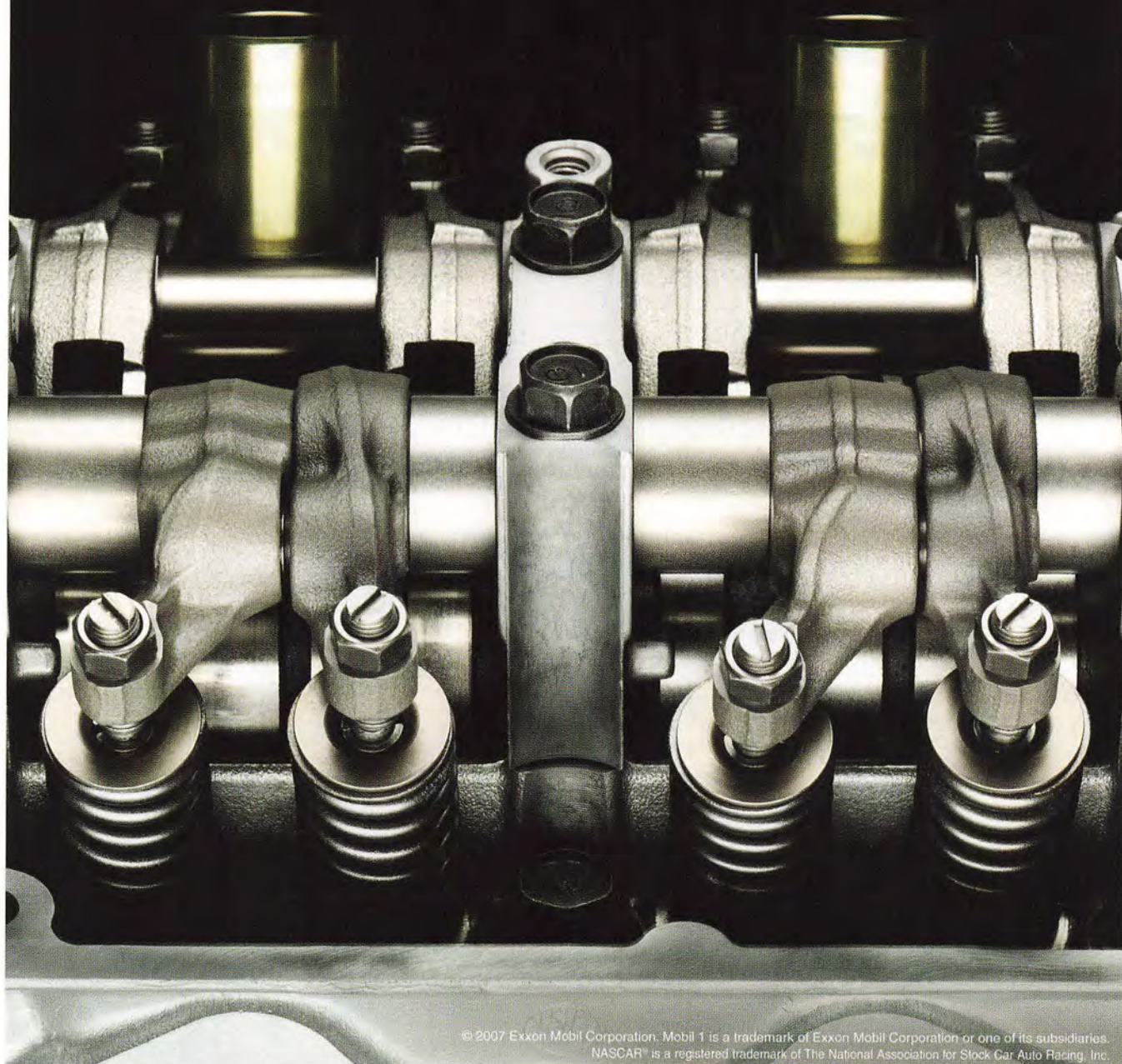
With this Fiesta Bowl ring I thee wed ...

The "hitch and go" is an offseason addition to the wide-open playbook Boise State flashed in January's Fiesta Bowl. Star running back Ian Johnson proposed to cheerleader Chrissy Popadics (left) after his winning 2-point conversion on a Statue of Liberty play and followed through over the weekend in Idaho. There wasn't a dry eye in the church, same as on Oklahoma's side of the field seven months ago.

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